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Jesus' friends

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Part I

Jesus the healer

Jesus, man of relations

In the Gospels we see Jesus curing different people. To understand his work, we should not restrain ourselves to thinking at the body's healing. The action of Jesus always includes different aspects.

1. The episodes are presented as examples with a deep meaning.
    a. The miracle is for the person because he is in need
    b. He rescues him not only from the physical ailment, but also and especially from the social stigma the illness carries (that is a punishment from God, it makes impure whoever gets in touch with him, etc.)
    c. There is also the psychological and emotional aspect of the person that often feels hopeless, rejected, abandoned, inferior or inadequate, but, after the miracle, feels that life is back with all potentialities.
2. It is done to provoke the listeners to reflect
    a. The parts of the body he cures have a significance in the literature and culture, and relate to some social or religious issue. By curing them Jesus indicates the need to heal the correspondent issue in the society.
        i. Hand = capacity of acting, of giving a contribution to society and to those in need.
        ii. Walking = change in life, capacity to go from one place to another, but also from one stage to another of my life.
        iii. Eyes – sight = capacity to understand reality, the capacity to see the spiritual side of it and its role in the plan of God
        iv. Ear and speech = capacity to communicate with others, to witness and to accept the witnesses.

v. Skin – leprosy it is the way we are seen by others. We cover with clothes to show to others something different, remain naked to show the reality we are. Skin damaged by leprosy means incapacity of being accepted by others, showing the bad part of ourselves
vi. Blood is the source and seat of life. The loss of it means losing the meaning of our life.
vii. Being short = incapacity to reach our goal, feeling inferior towards others.

b. The viewers who witness the event, usually reject the miracle because they do not want to address those issues

3. Among these we should include the approach Jesus has with other categories of people who are not sick, but yet are rejected: sinners, women, children, poor, Samaritans.

Jesus, the poor and the sick

When Marginalization is caused by the economy.

We start our journey here through the places of marginalization visited by Jesus.

The poor are certainly the most widespread category among the marginalized, and it is above all among the poor that all other forms of marginalization are most evident: racism, sexual discrimination, religious fundamentalism, etc.

When we think of the poor, we naturally think of the alms we may give to the homeless person we meet on the sidewalk or to the one who knocks on our door. It was a bit like this even in the time of Jesus. In the Jewish religion, to express the concept of almsgiving, the word "Sadaqah" was used, which in itself means "justice". In other words, almsgiving was part of social justice. The Greek word "*elemosyne*" instead derives from the root of mercy and compassion.

Throughout the biblical writings, help to the poor has always been appreciated, for example in Tobit 4,7-11 it says: "*God looks away from you if you look away from the poor*".

Even the fact that Jesus teaches us how to give alms (Mt 6:2-3) indicates that it was a well-established tradition, so Jesus does not bother inviting us to give alms, he limits himself to teaching how to do it.

In the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus presents himself as a poor man

who has nowhere to lay his head and sends his disciples to go without money in their belts, but in the Gospel of John, it is clear that the community of Jesus has its own cash and its cashier, and the money is also used to give alms (cf. Jn 12:1-8.). During a dinner at Lazarus' house, Maria takes a pound of very expensive nard perfume. Judas complains, saying: "*Why didn't she sell it for 300 denarii (corresponding to 300 days of work) and give the proceeds to the poor?*", but then John points out that Judas said this because he was a thief and kept the purse. Jesus concludes: "*Let her alone because you will always have the poor with you*". Jesus does not accept the criticism and defends Mary, who was undoubtedly from a rich family, because at that moment she is preparing the body of Jesus for burial, while it was precisely money that pushed Judas to betray Jesus. John himself judges Judas' comment in a negative way, calling him a thief. Jesus' phrase "*You cannot serve God and money*" indirectly resonates.

Let's say, therefore, that the disciples had a purse with money used for their needs and for almsgiving to the poor. On the other hand, Jesus himself had advised the rich young man to sell everything and give it to the poor. Money is not the important aspect in the life of the disciples and an excessive use of it can be justified if it is done to honor a poor man who will die deprived of any honor like a criminal. However, Jesus does not forget the poor, and by saying: "*You will always have the poor with you*" (not among you), he wants to underline the Church's commitment to the poor, a commitment that should never end.

There are a few other episodes in which money appears: In Luke 8,3 it is written that a group of rich women served the Lord and his

disciples with their possessions. In the episode of the Samaritan woman, the apostles had gone to the city to do the shopping. In John 13:27-30, during the last supper, Judas receives the piece of bread from Jesus who then invites him to do immediately what he had to do; upon hearing these words, the disciples comment that perhaps he had told him to buy what was needed for Easter, or that he should go and give alms to the poor. It was the typical custom of the Jews to honor the eve of Passover with almsgiving to the poor.

In John 6,5-7 there is the episode of the multiplication of the loaves and we see that this time Jesus refuses to have recourse to money to help the hungry. He prefers to resort to a kid's snack to show that the solution to the problem of poverty and indigence is not in the amount of money you have, but in sharing whatever we have. The fact that at Jesus' request to provide bread for the crowd, Philip calculates how much money it takes to buy bread, means that they had at least some money. Jesus' provocative proposal to buy bread is rejected not because it's strange but because of the enormity of the amount needed. Jesus accepts the boy's offer because the poor share what they have with other poor; he takes the bread and the fish from his hands and distributes them. He too shares with the poor, in fact the boy had certainly gone to offer something for Jesus, not for everyone; he didn't think about the miracle. John's intention in presenting this miracle is to give a sign that introduces the reality of the Eucharist. Christians should learn to pass from sharing the Eucharistic supper to the material sharing of concrete life. The Gospel does not ask us to solve the problem of world poverty in a miraculous way, but says that we must first give to Jesus the money, or other

things we give to the poor. If we place our possessions in God's hands, for sure they end up with the poor and in the best possible way.

In conclusion we can say that despite having lived as a poor man with the poor, Jesus takes care of them and teaches his disciples to do the same.

In our society, the poor, homeless people, drug addicts, immigrants, etc. are increasingly marginalized, so that they do not disturb the serenity of those who are well. Luckily there are associations that are interested in them. So, the provocation of Jesus: "*You will always have the poor with you*" should reach all Christians and call them to true sharing.

We can, therefore, say that the poor have an important, privileged role in the ministry of Jesus. Before moving on to an overview of the poor, let us see a curious fact presented to us by the Gospel of Matthew. The Gospel of Matthew is made up of 3 large parts.

1. The preparation. It includes the two chapters of the birth and childhood of Jesus (chaps. 1-2) and the two chapters in which we have the baptism, the temptations and the calling of the first disciples (chaps. 3-4). Here Jesus is the poor man, not welcomed, born in a stable, visited by shepherds and foreigners, persecuted by the King and who has to flee abroad to save himself.
2. The ministry of Jesus. This part (chaps. 5-25) revolves around 5 great discourses. He begins by proclaiming blessed the poor, the meek, the hungry and thirsty, the persecuted, and ends by saying that it is precisely the poor,

the hungry, the thirsty, the imprisoned and the foreigners who are the key to entering the Kingdom of Heaven.

3. The fulfilment: death and resurrection (chaps. 26-28). Jesus is again the rejected, captured, stripped, beaten. He will be the one to open the doors of the Kingdom of Heaven for us.

Lazarus and the rich man

(Lk 16:19-31)

What's wrong in being rich?

This passage is not the story of a miracle, but a parable, that is, a teaching that allows us to understand Jesus' way of thinking. It is a very delicate story because it lends itself to many politically colored interpretations and therefore could be used in a wrong way. I will try to stick to the text.

What is the meaning of wealth? Most people today would say that one can accumulate as much wealth as he wants, and use it as he pleases, as long as he then remembers, with charity, to help those who have not managed to accumulate anything. According to this interpretation, the rich man would only have committed a sin of omission, that is, of not having helped Lazarus.

What does Jesus say about it? At the beginning of chapter 16, Jesus had told the parable of the unfaithful steward and with it he had shown us a different use of material goods. With this passage he continues the argument, and does so using a story. Jesus usually avoids animated discussions because in them everyone hangs on his position, and in the end, only remembers his ideas. He prefers using the parables, which force everyone to reflect.

The message of this parable is much more provocative than one usually thinks. The famous doctor and musician Albert Schweitzer,

reading this parable, saw in Lazarus Africa knocking at the doors of Europe, so, he left everything to go there.

The first character we meet is a rich man. He doesn't have a proper name, he is simply "rich". There is no mention of any sin of his; it is not said that he stole or was dishonest. Maybe he also went to the synagogue, prayed, and so forth. Not even Abraham holds anything against him, he only says: "*On earth you were rich, now things are different*". He was probably simply a clever, capable man, who knew how to invest his assets well and, according to the mentality of the time, everyone certainly called him "*blessed by God*".

He was dressed in purple and red. Purple was the wealth of Tire and Sidon, and such clothes cost a lot. The dress indicates how we want to appear in the eyes of others, how we want to be considered. In the Old Testament the dress is always a metaphor of the person's moral attitude. Even the NT has many similar expressions: "*Clothe yourselves with virtue*", "*Clothe yourselves with Christ*".

He was dressed in transient material, in things that will rot in the future, none of it will remain. If this man's wealth is taken away, what is left? Not even his name remains, as if he didn't exist. What do we want to be known and remembered for?

What is this man filled with? He gorges himself on tasty and abundant food. He seems to live to eat, to gorge himself. Jesus often participates in banquets but not to gorge himself but to speak to people in a more familiar way. He proposes a banquet where the master is God.

So, in summary, our "rich" is a person who is not doing anything wrong.

The second character is Lazarus. He has a name which means "my God is a helper". Usually we know famous people, the rich, the powerful by name; the poor are unknown, they are just numbers. In Jesus' parable it is only the poor who have the name and it is a name that testifies God's closeness.

What was he doing? He stood at the door and contented himself with the breadcrumbs. In those days there were no forks and knives, people ate with hands, then, to remove the grease or dirt from hands, the crumbs of the bread were used which were then thrown to the dogs. Lazarus feeds on this, just like dogs.

What good did Lazarus do? We know nothing about it, we only know that he is poor. Maybe it was because he was unlucky, or ill, or maybe even because of some of his mistakes.

The third character is God. He does not appear directly, but the thought of Him is related to us by Abraham. This, being the Father of the Jewish people, is the most authoritative mouth to know what is right or not. What does God think of this situation, which is also valid today, where 1% of people have more wealth than the remaining 99%? Sooner or later the time will come when all parties end. We can see this also in the parable of the dishonest administrator, but also in the parable of the rich man who, after an exceptional harvest, wants to build new warehouses to enjoy a long life of abundance. Today's parable says that this man ended up in torment. It does not tell us why; however, there are impressive details in the story.

- "*The rich man opened his eyes*", finally! He had never opened them before and he had never seen the poor man, he sees him now, but it's too late. If he had not kept the goods for himself,

but had handed them over to Lazarus, now they would happily be together.

- "*Now there is an abyss between you and Lazarus*". It was already there on earth, but now it can no longer be filled. Even today there are many chasms in society between rich and poor, young and old, industrialists and jobless people, healthy and sick, etc. These abysses must be filled from here, because God's goods are, not only sufficient, but even abundant, and must be used to fill the abyss.

The message of the parable is not a recommendation to give alms, but tells us that God does not tolerate these abysses. It's not a bad thing that you're rich, the bad thing is that you don't make an effort to eliminate what separates you from others.

Unfortunately, we are well aware that the laws of today's market leave us no room for negotiation on how to use these assets.

Abraham presents himself as heartless. The rich man asks to send Lazarus to tell his five brothers about his destiny. They represent all the people of Israel and are five like the books of the Torah. Abraham denies permission.

Instinct does not lead us to give, but to hold back; what can cure us? The rich think that a miracle would be enough (like making the camel go through the eye of a needle). Abraham says that a miracle is not needed, not even an apparition, but the Word of God is needed. It is the word of God that can make us understand what destination the goods of the earth have. Let's take for example what Isaiah says at chapter 58, a reading we do every year at the beginning of Lent. While speaking about fasting, he clearly tells us that true fasting for

God is giving bread to the hungry, etc. these needy people are your own flesh, your brothers.

It's not easy being Christians and, if we are consistent, we are asked to go against the mentality of the vast majority of those around us, but above all, we are asked to go against the inner impulses that each of us has in the face of things. Let us begin, at least, to open our eyes to see our neighbor as God sees them.

For reflection:

- Do we notice the needs of the people around us?
- Do we believe that God is present in them?
- Are we able to do something for them?
- How much does attachment to material things influence our lives?
- When it comes to deciding on matters of economy, or personal comfort, or the satisfaction of some of our desires, do we remember the teachings of the Gospel and Social Justice?

The paralytic man

*(**Lk 5:17-27**; see also Mk 2:1-12; Mt 9,1-8)*

Who is in movement and who is remaining still? For which reason?

We are in Capernaum; Jesus returns to Galilee after a trip abroad. Capernaum is the city where he stayed most of the time if he was not walking around the villages, where he performed the highest number of miracles, but it is also one of those in which the inhabitants, with their disbelief, created the most obstacles for him; just remember the curse of Jesus: “And as for you, Capernaum: ‘Will you be exalted to heaven? You will go down to the netherworld.’ For if the mighty deeds done in your midst had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day.” (Mt 11:23). This is a recurring theme throughout the gospel: those who should be closest and understand him, are the ones who reject him. Why? Perhaps because those who are far away see the exteriority of Jesus' gestures and are attracted by them, while the neighbors, already having a relationship with him, would feel more obliged not only to accept but also to follow what he says. It is also true that those with a full stomach end up no longer appreciating the food placed in front of them, while those who are hungry find everything "God's grace". Are we still "hungry for God?".

When faced with a needy person, Jesus' attitude always goes in two directions. We see it well in this episode.

With the paralytic he shows himself as a friendly, loving savior. First, he calls him "son", then he not only gives him healing but he also forgives his sins.

But his concern is not limited to him. Jesus also targets the spectators, the unbelievers. With them he has a different attitude. He provokes them, he underlines their contradictions, and he wants them to get out of their fixed schemes. It should be noted that these people are, in a certain sense, afraid of Jesus, in fact they do not make an open objection, but limit themselves to grumbling in private. Their reasoning is based on a staple of the law: Only God can forgive sins. It is an absolute dogma, unassailable in the face of which there is no escape. Instead, Jesus seems to teach a new way of dealing with dogmas; They are not a new interpretation, but an attitude that allows us to understand their true meaning. The mental rigidity of the Pharisees limits them to the reading of the letter, to what is written and to the mental smallness of the reader. But what is written, in itself, is limited because it is expressed in human language, and also those who need to accept it are human. Jesus reminds us that the fundamental function of the Dogma is to make us enter the nature of God and therefore what makes us understand the true meaning of those words is not the formula, but the nature of God.

Christ is trying to explain to those people two important aspects of God that they have not yet understood and do not want to accept:

The first is that God is a god of mercy, because he is a God of Love.

The second is that this love, in order to be true to itself, became incarnate in Jesus.

The Jews, instead, consider love and mercy as two of the many

attributes of God, therefore secondary aspects, as if God could do without them, if he wanted to. The possibility, therefore, of a God who becomes incarnate, i.e., renounces his nature to indulge in a secondary aspect (love), becomes a heresy and undermines God's uniqueness and omnipotence. If we look closely, along the centuries and perhaps even now, many Christians have behaved in the same way, placing an Almighty God at the center and waiting in a fatalistic way for him to do what he wants, hoping that he will always want something that is good for us, while the duty of the believers is to do as much as possible according to the established laws.

If God is omnipotent and also has among his attributes that of Love, sometimes, if necessary, he can renounce the attribute. This is how many explain diseases, catastrophes, etc. If, on the other hand, God is Love by essence, an omnipotent love, then everything must be explained starting from the love of God, including illnesses, catastrophes, which, for the human mind, is often difficult to understand. This is the great challenge of Christianity. All religions accept a God who loves, only Christianity accepts a God who is Love by essence.

The dispute with the Pharisees that will accompany Jesus throughout his life is all here. The God of the letter is a God made to measure for the position of the powerful, he is a God who satisfies their mentality, makes them feel secure, important. They were like ministers of a powerful king (God), the only one who could stand up, at least in principle, against the Romans or king Herod. We could say that religion was used in function of their power and not vice versa. Then maintaining their position became more important than God

himself and they would often fall into contradiction as when, in the end, they will appeal to the Romans to get rid of Jesus.

But let's come to the paralytic. To him Jesus shows mercy. I prefer, as reference text, the version of Luke or the one of Mark. Mark usually has more details, Luke is more attentive to the humanity of the people involved, Matthew is leaner and more dogmatic, more attentive to the doctrinal teaching that Jesus wants to give us. Well Luke recounts the curious fact that while Jesus is at home and is discussing with various people, including some doctors of the law and Pharisees, a large crowd had come to such an extent that the bearers of the stretcher of the paralytic are unable to pass. So, they invent to climb onto the roof, uncover it and lower the stretcher where Jesus was. The fact is told in detail precisely to create the distinction between the two groups: the Pharisees and the bearers of the paralytic. It is interesting to see that the Pharisees come to Jesus' house, they enter and are listening, so, there is already a certain interest, but they are passive, they sit there and there they remain. They lack the freedom of mind to accept what they hear. On the other hand, however, we have these simple, almost desperate but active and ingenious people. In the story both their needs and their faith are very clear. It is this undercurrent of need and faith that makes Jesus' miracle possible.

What are Jesus' attitudes? He sees "their" faith; I emphasize "their", the one of the man, but also of those who brought him. Jesus reintegrates the paralytic in the community and underlines the redemptive aspect of the community's faith. He then adds the provocative phrase: "Your sins are forgiven". Jesus looks at the whole

person, at the relationship between the spirit and the body. According to the mentality of the Pharisees, diseases were a divine punishment for the faults committed by the person or, in the case of diseases at birth, by his parents. If this is true, then it is impossible to heal a person, because doing so would go against the will of God who wanted to punish him. But if Jesus heals the sick man, it means that, or he is more powerful than God, or in any case, manages to make Him change his mind. Herein lies the provocation. Clearly, Jesus does not want to underline the link between sin and suffering; He uses the episode to show the contradictions of the position of the Pharisees. Certainly, there are some links, but Jesus' perspective is not based on guilt, but on the mercy that must envelop the whole person with his weaknesses, whether they are physical "Get up and go", or moral "your sins are forgiven", or social, reintegrating the person into society. This aspect of restoring the person to his dignity is even clearer in the case of lepers or those possessed by demons. For me this social aspect of recovering the person in front of people's eyes is more important than the healing itself, especially since the miracle is inserted precisely in the context of a social conflict. Certainly, at that moment the paralytic must have experienced a huge joy, beyond the joy of being able to walk again, finding himself in front of a Jesus who uses him to attack those who were so easy to exclude him, judge him and consider him cursed. If we look at our works of charity, the vast majority of people who come to us do not receive a physical solution to their problems. A poor man asks us for money, we feed him, we also pay for his medicines, but he remains poor and tomorrow he will need to come again. If a sick person goes to the hospital, healing is a

long process, and is often only temporary; sometimes it fails. We have to pay attention not only to the physical aspect but also to the social and spiritual aspect of those we meet in our apostolate. This person must feel welcomed, loved, useful; he must feel that the social barriers, which his weakness or his infirmity have created, are overcome; then this person must have the opportunity to experience the merciful God who looks beyond simple physical weaknesses, but heals the intimate, the sense of guilt, the sense of unworthiness, the sense of abandonment.

There is one more thing to note. If you look at the list of healings that Jesus performs, you will see that they cover the various parts of the body or rather the various parts of people's lives. Today he has healed the ability to walk, to go. Walking is always a sign of change, of a goal to reach. The people of Israel walked for 40 years in the desert after leaving Egypt, to enter the Promised Land; Elijah walked 40 days to reach Mount Horeb and meet God. The Gospel of Luke is presented as a long journey from Nazareth to Calvary. Those who set off have a goal to reach and the path is what allows them to reach it. Numerous times, in the Gospel, we hear the words "go!", "come!"; these words always indicate a needed change of life.

Those who walk come out of themselves and meet others. Those who, instead, remain closed in on themselves, on their fears, on their search for personal satisfaction, on what Pope Francis would call "self-referentiality," do not set out, and have no goals to reach. The real paralytics of the Gospel passage are the Pharisees who are sitting there listening, who do not go to meet Jesus but just to hear him, and who, even when the sick person returns home, remain seated there

grumbling. These are the paralyses that hurt us. In Matthew's Gospel, immediately after telling the paralytic to get up, Jesus says to another person, Levi: "Follow me" and he, leaving the tax counter behind, gets up and follows him. Wasn't being a tax collector considered one of the greatest sins? Here too, Jesus does social promotion. First of all, he gets himself invited to dinner by him, a dinner with all his friends (this is the real incarnation), then he makes him not only a convert (evangelization) but even a model for others, he makes him an apostle.

Let's ask ourselves: what is my paralysis? What are the things that prevent me from going out towards others, from walking towards my goal, from doing what I conscientiously know I have to do? Maybe I'm ashamed of something, maybe I'm afraid of something, maybe I feel inferior, I feel judged, I feel not accepted, I have feelings of envy or jealousy. These are all things that block relationships, they don't allow me to open up, to take the initiative, to do.

We mentioned above the solidarity of those who accompany the sick to Jesus. We are all sinners. Just as there is solidarity in evil, however, there is also solidarity in good. Now my relationship with others, friends, members of the community, serves to obtain the good, to help each other to reach God or is it a solidarity with evil, to seek our interest, our comfort?

For reflection:

- Am I still hungry for God? Do I search for Him or do I just give for granted that he is there?
- How do I rapport myself with rules, timetable and obedience?

Do I simply stick to the letter or do I try to understand its spirit, to fulfill its meaning?

- How do I react to situations which were not planned, not contemplated in our timetable and maybe disturb my quiet life?
- In front of an unexpected obstacle, am I pro-active or do I usually wait passively for somebody else to solve the problem?
- When I help a person, where is my focus? What am I trying to achieve?
- Is there any person that I find difficult to accept or that I easily judge? What is there that pushes my judgments? What prevents me from loving him?

The possessed from Jerasah *(Mk. 5:1-20)*

Inability to control the evil that separates us from the world

This is a somewhat strange miracle, of which one would feel like saying that it was Jesus' defeat rather than a victory. Certainly, in this account, there are many things that are difficult to understand and which make this miracle at least dubious.

1) First of all, we are in a non-Jewish territory. It is true that Jesus came for the whole world, but this fact was neither understood nor accepted by the Jews, not even by the apostles. Furthermore, miracles require faith, and it is difficult to prove the faith of one who has a different religion.

2) Second point: the person does not ask for the miracle. The one who does the speaking is not the person, but the devil, and he does not ask to be healed, but to be left in peace, to be left inside the possessed person, that is the opposite of a miracle.

3) Third point: Jesus allows the devil to enter the herd of pigs and they drown in the lake, causing an enormous loss for the herdsmen: does Jesus perform a miracle to harm so many people?

4) Fourth point: the result of all this, is that the local people chase Jesus away, that is, they don't even give him time to preach.

5) Last point: the freed person asks to become a disciple, to be able to follow Jesus, but He does not allow him, he leaves him there among the pagans. He could have allowed him to stay with him for a few months, educate him in the faith, convert him, prepare him and then send him back as he did with the other apostles, instead he leaves him there. What's the point of all this?

This story is set between two great miracles: The calming of the storm on the lake and the resurrection of a little girl, two miracles that show us what is the meaning of life, where is the ability to overcome those forces that seem uncontrollable (death, but also problems, addictions, etc.). The first episode, in particular, makes us understand that we are often unable to govern our lives, that every wave seems to submerge us; the material forces no longer hold up while the spiritual forces, instead of helping us, seem to sleep.

So here too there must be some teaching that goes beyond the fact itself, and involves the value of life.

Let us address more specifically the doubts raised earlier.

1) It is symptomatic that Jesus crosses the lake, goes into a foreign territory, does only this healing, and immediately comes back. The purpose of the journey must be sought precisely in those few facts, because he neither preached nor did anything else. The fight with the Devil is a fight without a quarter, you have to defeat him wherever he is. This struggle must come to touch every part of our lives, even those areas that do not seem to belong to the religious sphere. Just as there is no person in the world who is not a child of God, so there is no area of our life that does not belong to him. The fact that we are in a non-Jewish territory already tells us the universality of Jesus' plan

of salvation. It all had already begun with the Magi; here we have another episode, then we will have the Canaanite woman, finally we will have the Centurion who asks for the healing of the servant and, at the feet of the cross, another centurion who will declare his divinity.

2) The second aspect is linked to the first: the fact that the person, not only does not express faith, but does not even ask for healing, clearly indicates to us the vastness of the Lord's mercy. He himself will say: "*I was sent for sinners*." It is not they who ask Jesus to come, it is he who goes, and then with his actions he provokes them to ask for forgiveness. The demoniac does not have the inner freedom to accept Jesus or ask for his help, because he is subjugated by the devil, but as soon as he is freed and is capable of using his intelligence and his will, he immediately asks to follow Jesus. Let us think of how many people we serve in our works of charity, who are not Christian, or are Christian by name, but are not interested in religion, who come to us because they need bread, medicine, shelter, but have no intention of becoming good Christians. Jesus loves those more than others, not because he loves their choices, but because they need Him more. This is the most important work of mercy: to bring back to God those who are far away. This is the center of Don Orione's charism, in which charitable actions are only the means, while the aim is to bring to Christ and the Church those who are far from them.

Here we have a person possessed by the devil, so uncontrollable that he can't even enter the villages, he can't be chained: he breaks all the shackles, nobody can approach him. He doesn't have one devil but a whole legion of devils. The devil's psychological attitude is interesting: he does everything, the man is like a baby in his hands. In

the face of the weak, he shows himself to be violent, uncontrollable, unapproachable, but when he sees someone stronger than him (Jesus), he runs, prostrates himself at his feet and implores him. He does not ask to be healed but not to be chased away. It is not the person who comes and begs, but the devil himself. Sometimes it seems that our passions hold us captive, they are dictatorial, they manage our relationships with other people. When we undertake a serious path to get rid of them, instead of fighting, they begin to play the part of the imploring child: "*Come on, after all, what's wrong with it?", "Don't do other people the same?", "How will you manage without the pleasure that we give you?", "One more time only*". They want us to pity them and let them stay, so that as soon as we let our guard down, they start leading again. Saint Ignatius of Loyola, in the Spiritual Exercises, when he describes the action of the devil in our spiritual life, compares him to a courtesan who acts as a hostess with the weak, but with the strong she behaves like a weak person to arouse pity. And then, she always looks for an alternative, it would seem a way to save herself, but it is, instead, a last attempt to harm us, a small revenge: by killing pigs, the devils cause Jesus to be expelled from that area. Let us remember that the Devil's sole purpose is to harm us. Jesus does not compromise on our salvation: he gives it and gives it complete.

3) The attitude of Jesus seems strange, which allows the devil to go to the pigs who then throw themselves into the lake causing enormous losses for the local herdsmen. Various interpretations have been made on this fact: (a) Some say that the episode was written by Jews to condemn the eating of pork, which first the Greeks and then

the Romans were making more normal in Palestine as well. That would not seem like a sufficient explanation. (b) Some say that the name of the devil, legion, the number of pigs, 2000, are a way of alluding to the Roman legions and that therefore it is a way of attacking the Romans. This is also unlikely. (c) Some say that in order to get the devil out of our lives, we must be willing to sacrifice anything.

More simply, taking a little from all these theories, we can consider here the pigs as a symbol of the pagans or rather of the godless, (this is what the Jews called the pagans, since they considered the pig as an impure animal not even to be approached); that's why the devil can enter there. But evil always ends up defeating itself, in fact the pigs throw themselves off the cliff. The herdsmen are hurt by the loss and decide to chase Jesus away: this is a point that needs to be made clear. These pigs represent what keeps pagans staying pagans. They represent all those emotional, material, mental, traditional and cultural ties that prevent us from being everything to the Lord. You must have the courage to cut. We would have a thousand excuses to keep these things, all in all, taken one by one, they are not a great obstacle, they are trivial things, but they are compromises which, together with all the others, take up all our time, our affection. It is hard to cut, it calls for sacrifice, renunciation of popularity and power over others. As soon as we start cutting, we feel empty and weak. We are often rejected by others and we feel like we are hurting them, after all, I want to convert, but I can't force the other to do the same, so why do I have to make him suffer? But emptying yourself is an important part of the journey, because only

in this way is the space created where Christ can enter. The herdsmen, beyond the material loss, will in the end gain, because they have lost what, for them, represents evil.

4) The herdsmen don't understand this right away, and chase Jesus away. This is just one of the many oppositions that Jesus has to face in his life, up to the cross. Even the Jews, the first and direct beneficiaries of Jesus' miracles and preaching, will eventually reject him and prefer a terrorist like Barabbas.

5) Jesus goes away but does not abandon them, he leaves them the former possessed, not because he does not want him with him, nor because he is already prepared, but so that he is always in the midst of his villagers as a reminder of what happened, a visible sign of God's power, a sign of the difference God's grace can make in another person, when this opens his heart, and let the grace work. He will be a reminder that, at the right moment, will help them to return spiritually to Jesus. Jesus does not force us to accept his grace. If we close the door to him, he stays out, if we send him away, he goes out, if we shout at him, he stays silent, he respects our freedom, but he is faithful to his love, he does not abandon us, he cannot abandon us. He leaves some windows open, some signs of provocation, some handholds to cling to in order to start flooding us again with his love, as soon as we give him a nod of consent.

For reflection:

- There is no part in us that should be excluded from our total dependence on God, that can be excluded from our relationship with Him.

- There is no one in the world that we can stop loving. Maybe we won't be able to render him due service, maybe we will even have to push him away for the good of others, but we will have to do it with love and understanding.
- No compromises with the devil, no quibbles left behind, and above all no fear of renunciations, of the sufferings that the path of conversion will require of us.
- When we feel rejected by people, not understood, criticized, we don't have to worry. The only thing we have to worry about is verifying, in conscience, whether we are really doing God's work or some hidden interest of ours.
- Never despair. Whoever rejects the Lord, whether they are the people we work for or even if it is us with our sins, God will find a way to re-propose conversion, an opportunity to start over.

The man with a withered hand (Lk 6:6-11)

Inability to act, to work, to be productive

This passage of the Gospel takes up some of the issues we have already addressed. The needs of the sick person serve Jesus as an excuse to remind those around him of the corresponding spiritual needs they have. We have seen the paralytic who cannot walk and Jesus condemns the immobility of those who sit there criticizing; then we see the demoniac who is unapproachable for people, but Jesus is sent away by those people; later we will see the daughter of Jairus who lost her life and Jesus shows that while she is only sleeping, the unbelievers have lost the source of life i.e. hope. Today we have a person with a paralyzed, or rather withered hand. Here too there are various points of contrast with the people present.

The first point to underline is that Jesus is presented in motion (*Jesus entered*) while the other people present are static (*He was there*). It's not just a detail. Jesus is always represented on the move, on a journey. Those who do good cannot stand still, they must go and meet the others. Don Orione would say: "Out of the sacristy", let's not wait for the others to come looking for us. Those who really need it, often don't ask. Then it is Jesus who goes towards them, seeks them, does. The Scribes and Pharisees, the entourage of most of

Jesus' disputes, are static; they stand there observing and to criticize, judge, but they never move. They represent a bit of the Sabbath day in which one cannot do anything; they don't lift a finger to resolve situations. They are closed in their position of authority, of knowledge, and in the rigidity of their laws.

The man has a withered hand. The hand indicates action, the ability to do, to create. The eyes and ears represent the organs that allow the world to enter us (we see and hear what happens outside), while the hands and the mouth represent our way of entering and interfering with the world (speech and action). Here is a man who can no longer make his contribution to the world. God created the world and then handed it over to man to continue his work by taking care of it: well, this man no longer knows how to give his contribution.

Today with the advancement of technology and science we may find ourselves in an ideal position to do good, to contribute to creation, yet it often seems that the same technology blocks us from taking action. It's a bit like the ancient law that was created to benefit and protect man, but, little by little, has become an instrument of slavery. Often, we are slaves of technological legalism, slaves and therefore no longer free to act; we no longer have time, we don't have skills beyond our competence, we don't know how to overcome the distance that is created with those who have different technological skills; even physical motion has disappeared and this too affects our mood. By curing the sick, Jesus restores him in communion with God, in his place as God's collaborator in creation.

There is the clarification of the time in which the episode takes place. We are on a Saturday. Saturday (Sabbath), for the Jews, is the

holy day, the day of rest. Even God has rested to enjoy the creation that he has just accomplished, and is particularly proud of his work because now there is the man whom he created in his own image, who can now take care of it. It should be a day of celebration and instead the Jews had turned it into a day of slavery, due to the strict laws that prohibited all activities on it. So, is Saturday meant for men, or is man meant to serve Saturday? In the Gospel of Luke, there are seven Saturdays; 7 is the number that indicates perfection, and on each of these Saturdays Jesus will find himself arguing with the leaders of religion; the only exception is the last Saturday, the one in which Jesus will rest in the tomb, before the resurrection and before starting the new world in which Sabbath will no longer have value. From Easter everything will take its reference point, because it is the day of the new creation, which will be taken care of by the new man, the one reborn in baptism.

There is also the clarification of the place, the synagogue, the place where one goes to hear the Word of God, the only action that was allowed on Sabbath. Even Jesus goes there like the Pharisees. The question is: do these observant Pharisees really listen to the Word of God? Do they really understand it? It is indeed in the synagogues that many of his disputes take place, and where he shows that they do not understand the true word of God.

On this occasion, no one asks Jesus to perform the miracle. On one side there are the Pharisees who waited for Jesus to do so in order to then criticize him, on the other is the sick person himself, but he too doesn't ask; he too has lost the desire or hope of being freed from that bondage. What about us? Don't we often find ourselves

paralyzed, unable to do good? So, what do we do? We start judging everything and everyone and this becomes a sufficient excuse not to move, not to get busy. The Pharisees cite God's law, but the God to whom they submitted is a God created by their mind, out of fear; it is the God of Sinai who dictates laws, not the God who created man and brought him out of Egypt.

Jesus acts on the Sabbath and therefore frees man from legalism and gives him back to the world of the merciful God. He opposes the strict law with the commandment of love. The Pharisees prefer strict legality which gives them precise parameters within which to move and which does not require the creativity of love.

But Jesus doesn't limit himself to going against the norms and against the Scribes, He uses the sick person to force them to reflect and take responsibility for their position. Jesus' liberating and merciful intervention is therefore not addressed only to the sick, but also and above all, to those who need him, even more because they are sick with pride, fear and spiritual laziness. Precisely because God's mercy is unlimited, he never tires of proposing the path of conversion to everyone. Conversion is a move back in the right direction. So, he takes the sick person, places him at the center and asks: "Is it permissible to do good or evil?" Their sickness does not lie in the fact that they have different ideas from those of Jesus, but in the fact that they do not want to take any position, so they stand there in silence to see what happens. They could not have responded by giving him permission to break the Sabbath but neither could they have denied the sick person's need. Then they shut up. The curious thing is that in the previous chapter, when on a Saturday the apostles had passed

through the fields, had plucked some ears of corn, and started eating them, the Pharisees themselves had asked Jesus if it was lawful on a Sabbath day to satisfy a need. There Jesus took a stand. Have you ever been in a meeting where an important decision has to be made and everyone, in principle, agrees, but when it comes to choosing who is available to carry it forward, who gets involved directly, then silence reigns? Everyone looks around, everyone knows they should do it, but they don't want to expose themselves; everyone hopes the neighbor will raise his hand. Conscience tells the truth, but spiritual laziness is too strong.

The possibility of conversion exists when our self is removed from the center of the scene and the brother is placed in it, and seen as loved by God, indeed inhabited by God. Attention! Jesus does not focus on a hero, an idol to be copied, an attractive superior, etc. he puts at the center a poor, sick, needy person, one unable to act. The Pharisees fail to do this; they put themselves at the center, they see only their wounded and defeated pride. The sick person's need is less important than maintaining their status as law-abiding and therefore leaders of the people.

Jesus gives the man an order, an order that appears impossible to carry out, a real contradiction: he tells him to stretch out his hand when everyone knows that the hand is paralyzed. The man doesn't think about the contradiction, now he is moved by hope, so he obeys and the miracle is done; man returns to action, he returns to the order of the creator. As we have already said, the hand is for doing, but the hand is also for receiving. Extending your hand is the most normal way to receive a gift and here the man extends his hand to

receive the greatest gift from Jesus. The sick person who receives liberation automatically becomes a participant in creation. What do we give to people? We can share only what we have received (no jealousy or hiding for oneself). Do we give what we have received from God or do we give what we invent for ourselves? If I share God's gift, then I participate in creation, but if I share what simply comes from my head, then I make an alternative creation that often competes with God's one, and therefore I create division. Let's think about how much apostolate we do trying to put ourselves (our skill, strength, image) at the center.

But now the reaction has been unleashed. As long as it was their duty to make the decision, the Pharisees were blocked, now that Jesus has taken the initiative, they feel hurt and embarrassed, and then they react with ferocity to cover up their embarrassment.

It also happens to us, in discussions, that instead of listening to what the other says, and seeing the goodness of his argument, we just look for some foothold, perhaps even a small one, to which we can attach ourselves in order to counter-attack, thus sinking everything else which precisely, because it is good and right, it embarrasses us and forces us to move.

Concluding: what is our contribution to creation? We must

1- Take responsibility for who we are, and follow the promptings of our conscience.

2- Put the other, the person in need, at the center of our thinking and acting.

3- Ensure that our way of thinking, speaking and acting is animated by mercy, that is, by the awareness that we are servants of

God, the God who is also present in this brother in front of me.

For reflection:

- What contribution do we make to the growth of our family or community and of society as a whole?
- When we feel that we should do something to help others, do we have the courage to follow this intuition or do we let our fears block us in a passive attitude?
- Do we believe that God can give us the strength necessary to carry out the positive feelings that He, through our conscience, has inspired in us?
- By any chance, with our attitude, do we block other people from taking action?

Bartimaeus the blind (Mk 10: 46-52)

Inability to see the truth

We are again faced with a healing scene, very similar to the ones we have seen so far. As usual we have Jesus on one side, the poor on the other, and between them stands the crowd. They are spectators whom Jesus tries to provoke through the miracle, to change their negative attitude. Do you remember the crowd around the house of Jesus and the sick man who cannot enter, so must be lowered from the roof? The crowd that mocks Jesus when he says the little girl isn't dead? The crowd that chases away Jesus who healed the possessed man, the crowd that scolds the sick who come to be healed on Saturday? There is always a dispute between good and evil that underlies the miracles of Jesus.

Here, on one side, we have a festive scene; Jesus is entering the city with his disciples and the crowd of his followers; on the other side there is a scene of degradation, a beggar sitting by the side of the road: he is blind, he cannot even see what is happening. They look like two quiet scenes, normal in everyday life: someone is lucky and celebrating and someone is unlucky and in pain, two incommunicable worlds.

Bartimaeus, a person who has no name but who bears the name of his father, creates a disturbance to the peace and starts shouting. It should be noted that later he will say "*Let me regain my sight*", this means that we are dealing with a person who once could see and now, due to some illness, can no longer see, and this fact led him to

become a beggar. He could be the symbol of people who have fallen into some vice, sin and now find themselves in miserable situations. They look back to the good old days with a little nostalgia. They want to get out of their bondage and go back to what they were. Bartimaeus also wants to change his life and sees the possibility of doing so in the presence of Jesus.

Society, of course, doesn't like disruptions, everyone is comfortable with the things as they are, especially those on the side of the lucky ones, and so they do everything to silence Bartimaeus. They scold him, as if trying to change his life were a sin. They even try to discourage him: "*but who do you think you are*", "*an important person like Jesus certainly doesn't have time to waste listening to you*". How many Christians are there today who seek a quiet, comfortable life, made up of their routine, which includes the usual daily activities, even a little prayer, perhaps even almsgiving, but where everything is planned, without changes; everything is under control. Those who work in charity institutions know that tranquility and planning do not exist. The poor always have unexpected events, situations of misery that go beyond the type of charity you would like to do. Sometimes we go to Caritas to do some volunteering, thinking we'll come back happy, that we've done some good; but at the end of the day, we go home nervous and angry about everything we've had to go through. One would like to donate, but only up to a "certain point"; but how do you impose that "certain point" on those in need? It is precisely the encounter with these requests that go beyond what we would like to give, or even go beyond what we can give, that throws us down and makes us nervous.

Bartimaeus is not discouraged and shouts even louder. He is like so many people who, in the face of evil, do not give up; in their hearts they have a strong desire for rebirth. This is a sign of life, something

necessary for faith. Faith is not a passive or submissive being, God wants us to be active and reactive.

Here are the two contrasting situations we talked about earlier: Bartimaeus shouting and Christ's followers trying to silence him. It is precisely in the face of this conflict that Jesus stops. The gesture of stopping already indicates in itself, a change of situation. You follow someone who is walking, but if he stops, you are no longer a follower, just a bystander.

Jesus calls for Bartimaeus. That’s strange; he could have gone directly to him, after all we have always said that it is God who lowers himself to our level. But in this call, which is not direct to him, we see an action of human promotion. In a certain sense, Jesus obliges those people who first tried to block Bartimaeus to call him. It is first of all a lesson addressed to the followers. They now have to recognize in front of the blind man, that he was right, and that Jesus prefers him to them. We said at the beginning that there is the party scene on one side and the scene of degradation on the other, two incommunicable worlds. With this move, Jesus forces the first party to take a short break and meet the poor man, to re-install him where he had been excluded.

The fact of the call also highlights another aspect: He calls us but expects a response from us which is faith. Faith is not just expressed in words, but requires that we take decisive action to change. In this regard, the description of Bartimaeus' reaction, the radical change that takes place in him, is interesting: He was poor and only had a cloak which was a sign of his poverty. For the poor, the cloak was everything; it was used to sit, to cover oneself during the day and also at night; it was the only security and comfort they had. Well, he throws it away now. He was sitting, static, waiting for alms, but now he leaps to his feet: the Gospel doesn't say "he got up", but "jumped

up". He was blind, that is, he could not go anywhere without being accompanied, now it is said: "he reached up to Him"; he is on the move, and he himself goes to Jesus. The desire for rebirth, for a radical change of life, gives him the strength, the energy to start the change already.

How many times have we experienced a strong desire to change; perhaps we have even glimpsed the road, but when it was time to take action, we felt blocked, our strength failed us and we sat down again in our poverty, to continue begging for a loaf of bread.

Jesus and Bartimaeus are now facing each other and it is again Jesus who takes the initiative. He asks: "What do you want me to do for you?". There is nothing taken for granted in faith, we are always required to verify our intentions to see if they truly correspond to God's will, but God never imposes his will on us. Bartimaeus wants to see, he wants to understand things for what they really are, he wants to be able to manage his life without depending on those who, perhaps in the past, had taken advantage of him; he wants to return to being able to do the good that gives joy, without being slave of the evil that had relegated him to a street corner to beg.

"Go! Your faith has saved you". The miracle is the fruit of faith. What was Bartimaeus' faith? In his behavior we see three aspects: Recognizing that you have a need, asking for it without getting discouraged, being willing to leave the past to embrace the new situation.

Last thing: Jesus has told him "*Go*!", but the Gospel says that he began to follow him on the way. The procession that had stopped due to the diatribe between the poor man and the disciples, gets back on its way and the poor man is part of this procession. When you experience Jesus and his mercy, other things lose their meaning.

For reflection:

- Do we recognize that we need a change to be true followers of Christ?
- What are the things, ideas, pre-conceptions that prevent us from seeing clearly?
- Do we prefer a comfortable, mediocre life or are we willing to let ourselves be provoked by the unexpected requirements of charity?
- Are we willing to leave behind the mantle of human security and comfort to go to the Lord and ask for a change?
- Are we willing to get back on the road following Christ, even if we don't know where he will lead us?

The dumb and deaf man (Mk 7:31-37)

Inability to communicate, to be able to express what you think, and to listen to what other people say or wants

"*They have eyes and cannot see, ears and cannot hear*". This phrase from the Old Testament represents well the people of Israel in the time of Jesus. The miracle of the healing of the deaf-mute is meant to be a response to this situation. Taken by itself, this miracle would appear to be one of many, done to help a person in need; it has, instead, a profound symbolic meaning that should not be overlooked.

We are in pagan territory, the Decapolis. Before returning to his homeland, Jesus must clarify one thing. They bring him a man who is deaf and unable to speak, or rather a stutterer, a situation we know in many people who, precisely because they can't hear us, are unable to formulate coordinated sounds. The reference is to the prophet Isaiah and to many other quotations from prophets, where it is said that the people of Israel are in exile (pagan territory) because they have not heard the Word of the Lord and, as a person who stutters, they no longer know how to invoke his name. The person that Jesus has in front of him to heal is the people of Israel.

Jesus preached and worked miracles, but he collided with people unable to listen to his word: some opposed him like the scribes and

Pharisees, others went to him only in search of the advantages resulting from the miracles he performs. Jesus came to preach conversion, to ask for a change in the way they live their relationship with God, but these people don't want to change. There are so many people, in our society, who are incapable of listening to the Word of God, either because they don't want to, or because they let themselves be carried away by a thousand misleading voices. We are not thinking only of non-believers, but also of those who declare themselves Christians and then take positions that are clearly opposed to the teachings of the Gospel. "God yes but only in Church, only on Sunday, everything else is my business, I must be the one to make decisions".

Let's pay attention to the details of the miracle.

The sick person is accompanied by other people; he would not have been able to come by himself because he could never have known that Jesus could cure him. Too many people need to be healed by Jesus, but they don't know it, they don't know Him, often they don't even realize they are sick. We are and called to bear witness to our faith in God also to allow many who are in need to know that God is the Father of all.

What does Jesus do? He brings him to the other side, away from the crowd. If the person who has become deaf is to be cured, then, first of all, he must be removed from the crowd, not so much physically, but removed from the mentality of the people, from everything that recurs in the common way of thinking: "So everyone else does, so everyone says". We need to let ourselves be led out of this mentality. Many Christians are television Christians, that is, they

allow themselves to be convinced by those who know how to speak better, and appeal to their wounded emotions, so then, at the right moment, they just repeat the formulas they heard like parrots.

Another detail: "*he put his fingers in his ears*". It was a pagan gesture, not a Jewish one. For the pagans the gestures were magical, but for Jesus they are a reminder of the "*Finger of God*" of which the Bible speaks so much and which indicates the strength of God. We must allow God's finger to touch us. It is a gesture that we still do today at the moment of baptism.

Then "*he put saliva on his tongue*." That's what gets him talking. Our mouth cannot speak well because it is often moved by the demons of greed, anger and revenge. If it is touched by the saliva of Jesus, which is the concentrate of his spirit and of his life, then our words will be guided by Jesus and no longer by the demons.

Then he "*looked up to the sky*". It is the sigh of Jesus who looks towards the Father. Jesus was sent by the Father to save this stubborn humanity wrapped up in sin, so he sighs in the face of the many needs of the people, the difficulty he finds in bringing healing to these people who do not want to listen.

Finally, he exclaims "Effatà", open up. It is an invitation to all of us who are deaf: we need to open ourselves to the newness of the gospel. Jesus cured the deaf mute, but his intention is to empower all the people of Israel to listen and speak.

People exclaim, "*He did everything right*." It is an expression from the book of Genesis, said on the occasion of creation. God has done everything right and whoever opens up to the Word of God gets back in order with God's creation that has done everything right.

Let's think a little about our society, how many times the world announces false messages to justify the wrong things it does; how much credulity we spread by giving an erroneous image of God. Let's think of how many discussions we have based on political, economic, partisan topics, and we leave the values of the Gospel in last place, or even out of the door.

Jesus asks us for permission to touch us with his finger, to put his spirit into our mouths; he invites us to open ourselves to his grace in order to learn how to hear and speak according to the truth so that "*The truth will set us free*."

For reflection:

- What kind of messages do I give to people, not only with words, but also with my life, my choices, my actions?
- Do I allow God to work in and through me?
- What are my priorities?

Levi and Zaccheus

(Mt 9:9-13; Lk 19:1-10)

Money cannot buy happiness

We present here two characters who share a similar experience of a “transforming” encounter with the Lord.

Levi is normally considered the apostle and evangelist Matthew because, while the Gospels of Mark and Luke speak of a call to Levi, the Gospel of Matthew narrates the same episode, but uses this name.

Matthew is a tax collector at Capernaum. Alongside him, we place Zacchaeus, who was even the head of the tax collectors of the city of Jericho. Both meet Jesus and are conquered by him. In both cases the conversion is also celebrated with a good lunch in which other people participate: from within the colleagues (sinners), and from the outside, the Pharisees who criticize this "too free" and scandalous attitude of the Master of Nazareth.

In the case of Levi there is something more, because Jesus calls him, not only to convert, but also to become his disciple.

Faced with this behavior of Jesus who, not only approaches sinners, but even allows himself to be invited to dinner with them, the "righteous" Pharisees express a categorical condemnation: “*How can someone who claims to be a Master accept the friendship of a sinner?*” Jesus' lifestyle doesn't convince them, his merciful attitude even less.

According to the culture of the time, accepting an invitation to a table meant sharing life and ideals with the person inviting, furthermore, in the rabbinical tradition, coming into contact with sinners made one impure. The tax collectors, people usually with good financial resources, given the work they did, were used to celebrating large banquets, the only diversion of that time in which to spend their money, and therefore, in addition to being considered traitors of the country because they collaborated with the Romans, cheaters and sinners for their lifestyle despising religious traditions, they also aroused the jealousy of many. Not all, of course, were the same. From the way they are presented, it seems that Levi and Zacchaeus, in a certain sense, differed from the others. From their attitude we can deduce that they felt an inner emptiness and a strong desire for serious answers.

The two episodes we want to analyze allow us to compare the style of the Pharisees, based on strict observance of the law and intolerance, with that of Jesus, based on mercy and on the desire for the conversion of the sinners. The Pharisees, from the height of their righteousness, feel obliged to correct and condemn the deviants. To do this, they "whisper" against Jesus' behavior: "*He went to eat at a sinner's house*". Jesus' answer is, as usual, a catechesis on divine mercy. For Jesus, these meals with tax collectors are the image of his incarnation. Jesus becomes one with us, with our corruptible flesh to bring about conversion in us and thus make our salvation possible.

As a result of Jesus' behavior, we see that while the Pharisees approach him to set traps and catch him in error, the tax collectors can approach him sincerely, to listen to him, to welcome him and also

to follow him. In a dispute with the priests of the Temple, Jesus will say: "*The tax collectors and prostitutes will pass you by into the kingdom of heaven*" (Mt 21:31).

Jesus shows that mercy knows how to be patient and respect the times necessary for everyone to convert. It is not easy to have an attitude oriented towards patience and gradualness. In fact, throughout the Gospel we see that even the apostles find it difficult to adapt to the new mentality required by the teachings of Jesus, to accept his humble, helpful, merciful style, and how much effort they had to put in, to accept his repeated announcements of his upcoming passion.

The Gospel doesn't say anything more about Matthew, except that he became one of the twelve.

The particular dynamic of confrontation between intolerance and mercy in dealing with sinners, is best developed in the episode of the meeting with Zacchaeus (Lk 19:1-10).

From the description, we immediately notice that this sinner is rich, but dissatisfied with his life; the money, the banquets, the power don't bring peace to his soul, so he is all agitated by the desire for a change. He has heard of Jesus as a person who, on the one hand, has strong words against the rich and those who accumulate wealth, but on the other hand is a friend of sinners and goes to eat with them. He wants to "*see His face*", hoping to find some answers there. When we feel restless, dissatisfied, we too shouldn't try to stifle the restlessness, as many would suggest, but let it speak, because it is often an opportunity to understand that there is something inside us that needs to be changed. The tendency of many is to look for noise,

parties, material things that make us forget our malaise, but it only calms down for a few hours and then comes back stronger. Perhaps Zacchaeus also, for years, had searched for satisfaction in banquets, but now he has found the right solution: he sets out to seek the face of Jesus. It is important to fix our gaze on the face of Jesus, because it is only there that we can find the true image of the face of the Merciful Father and thus not fall into the error of creating an image of God made to match our desires. Often, due to a mistaken image of God, we worship ourselves and our needs, instead of worshiping Him.

Zacchaeus tries to see him, but cannot, because of the crowd. When we set out in search of Jesus, we encounter many obstacles and the first of them is the mentality of the crowd that tries in every way to discourage us: “Forget it! It is not for you! Are you not fine as you are? Go home and enjoy your possessions! He won't see you, because you're a sinner." This is normal in an increasingly atheist society, but one scaring thing is that often the crowd that tries to stop us is not that of the outside atheist world, but the crowd of those around Jesus. It had already happened to the man born blind, to the children, to the sinner, to the paralytic, to the hemorrhagic woman. Those around Jesus seem to be jealous and think they have the right to protect Jesus, filter those who can approach him, and do not want to let others, especially the "dangerous", approach him. Often those who discourage us from our attempt to seriously seek an encounter with God and to make it a concrete experience, are precisely the so-called "believers", who are tied to their religious patterns, their traditions, their way of seeing God, and who do not like a God popular, coming out of their élite. Zacchaeus could have become discouraged

and instead continues stubbornly.

He is small, he feels somehow helpless in the face of the moral stature of this wall of followers of Christ, so he has to climb the sycamore tree to get a different point of view. Often, we must have the courage to leave aside pre-packaged images of God, in order to find a real one, a personal experience that is the only one that can make a difference for us. Climbing the tree is a symbol of the effort that each one must make in this search, and for us it could represent the effort to go and talk to someone, or to attend a Bible course, or to get involved in some charitable activity, etc., as long as they are things done with the desire to discover in them a different face of that Jesus we seek.

What is the face of Jesus that Zacchaeus discovers?

Jesus looks up, sees him and calls him. It was Zacchaeus who wanted to see Jesus and instead it is Jesus who looks up to see him. Jesus is below and looks up, as he had also done with the adulteress. Jesus is below because he is a servant and as a servant, he seeks the one he loves, the one that the crowd wanted to hide from him, someone who perhaps was ashamed to let himself be seen.

He looks at him and calls him by name, removes him from anonymity, makes him feel known and loved. What is interesting is that the name with which Jesus calls him "Zacchaeus" in Hebrew means "just", "innocent". A sinner is certainly not worthy of this name, but in the mouth of Jesus this name takes on its true meaning, because God does not look at our sins, but at our true nature, that of being called to be with Him.

He doesn't just look at him and call him by name, but also says:

"*Hurry down and get down because I have to come to your house today*". Ours is a God who is in a hurry to meet us and save us. "*Today*" I have to come to your house. Jesus offers us the present, not the past. He does not speak to him of his numerous sins of yesterday, but of the salvation that "today" he must give him. Furthermore, he doesn't say: I would like, I wish, I could, but he says "*I have to*" stop at your house. It's part of his nature, not wishful thinking. He is a God who asks for hospitality, who wants to enter our hearts because this is the place of truth and conversion, it is the place of love.

I imagine Zacchaeus' desire to talk to Jesus and ask him questions, but also the embarrassment: what to ask? How to ask, especially with so many people surrounding the master? How do I admit all my sins and weaknesses? Jesus fully overwhelms his feelings by taking the initiative. He does not say: "Convert", but: "offer me supper". Surely this was the last thing Zacchaeus could expect. For centuries we have thought and preached that God has prepared us for a well-defined vocation dictated by rules and rites created by Jesus; if we observe them faithfully, we are following Jesus, and he saves us. The words we use, "call, discipleship, meeting", all underline that the indispensable tool of the encounter is our loyalty. Here, however, the vocation is presented in a totally different way, following the paradigm of the Incarnation: Jesus, in order to call a person, first incarnates himself in his reality and from there, especially in moments of failure, he sends his invitation. This also happened to Peter who is called while he is with him in his boat after a fishing that seemed to be unsuccessful; it is precisely failure that becomes the miracle of conversion. We could say that, before calling the disciples

to follow Him, it is He who follows them.

This attitude must have aroused strong perplexities in the group of Jesus' followers, especially if we consider that among them there are people like Simon the Zealot, James and, somehow also Peter, who are known for their religious zeal.

"*Zacchaeus comes down and runs*". You have noticed how often in the Gospel, the important moments are described by verbs of movement. It seems that everybody is running, climbing, descending, walking. Our religion is not a static thing to be studied and lived at the table, it is all movement, because love is restless until it reaches its goal. One does not convert just by reading a book, even if it were the Gospel, but by setting out on the road, because the change of thought must become a change of life.

Jesus enters the house and the feast begins. Our God is the god of joy, a god who, when he meets the sinner, celebrates, like the father of the prodigal son, the shepherd of the lost sheep.

There at Zacchaeus' house two groups of people form: inside there are his friends, sinners, and outside there is the group of the "righteous" people who grumble. They had already grumbled before in the parable of the prodigal son and the episode of the sinner; the argument is always the same: "instead of staying with us, he goes away with sinners". Jesus is not one who adapts to the standards of the mentality of decent people, he overturns these stale ways of thinking that lead nowhere, he becomes a stumbling stone of scandal, to create something new, a new way of conceiving God, the true God .

What happens to Zacchaeus now that he has discovered the true face of God? The gospel says: "*he stood up and said*" ... wrong

translation. This verb is in the passive form and is the verb of the resurrection: “*he was raised on his feet*”. Zacchaeus is put back on his feet, reborn from the encounter with Jesus and in this new life, for the first time, he sees the poor. Before that, he had only seen people that we can exploit, opportunities to get rich, now he realizes their needs and gives them half of his assets. Why does God put things in our hands? To create love and bonds with people, especially those in need.

“*Today salvation has come to this house*”. Salvation is not something that happens the day we enter Heaven, but today, that is, the very moment we allow ourselves to be freed from the slavery of selfishness, from the desire to accumulate and we open ourselves up to others with the gift. Here Salvation has already began.

Let us think about this tactic used by Jesus and compare it to the one used in another passage, to address the rich young man. They are the opposite. He considered himself a just man with nothing to change, just looking for something to add to certify his righteousness. To him Jesus says: "Leave everything and follow me". Zacchaeus, on the other hand, is already predisposed to conversion and, without Jesus asking him, he gives away half of his goods and undertakes to possibly repair all the wrongs done.

It may be a coincidence, but it seems that the best "Christians" of the Gospel do not come from the circle of close disciples, but from that of the excluded: Zacchaeus, the "good" thief, the Centurion, the Canaanite woman, the Samaritan of the Parable, the Magdalene , etc.

For reflection:

- Do I consider myself a good Christian? Does this attitude of mine, if dictated by pride, perhaps shock others and become a reason for them to stay away from the Church?
- Do I have the desire to get to know Jesus thoroughly, the real one, the one with a human and merciful face?
- How do I feel about my weaknesses, my sins? Am I ashamed, do I hide them, or do I realize that they could be the starting point for a true encounter with Jesus?
- Do I dare to share my things with others, aware that love is more important than all the things I have?

The ten Lepers *(Lk 17: 11-19)*

Social exclusion and stigma due to our weaknesses or mistakes.

This text is full of contradictions, written on purpose by Luke to tell us that the facts told should be taken not only in the literary sense but above all in a figurative sense, with a view to a deeper teaching.

We are on our way to Jerusalem and Jesus makes us pass through Samaria and Galilee. In normal cases, to go down to Jerusalem it is not advisable to go through Samaria, both because of the hostility of the people and because of the roughness of the terrain. Usually, one descends into the Jordan River valley and then, upon reaching Jericho, one ascends. The indication of Samaria and Galilee indicates a land full of rebels (Samaria) and the land of everyday life, but full of pagans (Galilee). Jesus, on his journey towards achieving the salvation and redemption, does not avoid annoying situations, nor does he touch them, but goes towards them and enters them. He starts from everyday life, he doesn't go looking for special, pre-packaged, touristic or fashionable situations.

During this trip he met ten lepers. Leprosy, in the common mentality, was the symbol of sin or rather of the way used by God to punish the biggest sins. In the book of Leviticus, there are many provisions on how lepers had to behave to ensure that no one would approach them and become impure themselves. Leprosy makes one lose sensitivity so that one does not realize the evil that is affecting

him. For Luke, it is a symbol of those who lose moral sensitivity. When you sin you stay alive, but you are a leprous person, that is, who no longer knows how to recognize good from evil. The person disfigures, becomes repulsive, dehumanizes.

“He came to a village and met 10 lepers”. It is difficult to imagine that lepers were in the village and they went to meet Jesus. Lepers could not enter the villages, they had to stay outside, moreover, in a small village there could not be so many lepers. In the bible, the village is the image of tradition, of the old world from which one must leave (in the healing of the man born blind, Jesus takes him out of the village and after the miracle tells him never to return). Number 10 signifies totality. It seems that Luke wants to tell us that Jesus enters a village where everyone is leper, and perhaps it is precisely the attachment to the way of life of society, to tradition, to "it has always been done this way" that dehumanizes them. It is our world that now goes to meet Christ, because in each of us, in every environment of ours there is always something rotten and in meeting Jesus this comes out into the open, and with it also everything that one would not think exists. How many people have we already discarded with our mind because we consider them bad, incompetent, hateful? Jesus went directly to meet them, he mainly came for them.

“They call him by name and they call him master”. They seem to know him, which is unlikely given the area they live in and their situation. A curious thing is that in Luke's Gospel the only ones who call Jesus by name are 2 demons (they know Jesus well and are afraid of him), these lepers, the blind man of Jericho and the good thief on the cross. These are the people who, because of their situation of poverty, of being rejected by society, have the right and the ability to

enter into intimacy with Him. They also call Him "Master" because they recognize in Him, above all, the truth of his message with which they must confront in meeting him. They expect a definitive word from him, a word of healing. Perhaps, in our prayers, we are too formal, we address Him like the Pharisees or other people. The apostles themselves fall into this temptation and too often consider him an important but distant person. The only one who expresses strong feelings towards Jesus is Peter and he does it above all in the various moments in which he has to acknowledge his mistakes or his lack of faith.

Jesus tells them: "Go and show yourselves to the priests", and they go. In those days there was not much knowledge of medicine, but it was known that leprosy could not be cured. Since it was considered a sign of God's punishment, if one recovered, it was because God had forgiven him, so it was the job of the priests, not the doctors, to certify the healing. As long as they were sick they couldn't go, they had to get well first. Instead, they set off already, towards a destination forbidden to them. The moment they move away from the village, from the way of life of the world, they are healed: not immediately but along the way. On the journey of faith one must be willing to make risky choices, choices against the tide, humanly senseless choices, but driven by faith, by the knowledge that salvation is in Jesus and that salvation has nothing humanly sensible about it. We must not wait to be saints to walk towards God. We must leave immediately, begin the journey of faith immediately and along the way this same faith will heal us.

One of them, a Samaritan, decides to go back to Jesus to thank him. Jesus had said to go; the law also said that if one is healed he

must go to the priests. This leper disobeys and goes back. In Greek the word "go back" is the same word for "convert". It does not go against the law but beyond the law. The law only makes sense as an instrument that facilitates our salvation, but in itself it does not give salvation. What gives salvation is the personal, intimate encounter with Jesus, an encounter made of love and gratitude. This leper does not disobey but simply converts from a formal and empty obedience to an encounter of love and gratitude. In fact, Jesus not only does not scold him, but even indicates him as a model of correct behavior: "Were not all healed? Has none of them returned to give glory to God?". Jesus doesn't complain that they didn't come back to thank him but that they didn't give glory to God and whoever did was a foreigner. It was not the Jews but a foreigner who realized that the face of God, his glory, is not in the glory of the Temple, but in the merciful face of Christ. On the journey of faith it is not enough to obey all the rules, you have to put your heart into it. It's not enough that you come to mass every Sunday, if you do it only to obey the precept, you need to enter into an attitude of trust, praise, loving listening, thanksgiving, commitment, following.

In fact, Jesus adds: "Go, your faith has saved you." All were healed but only one was saved. All obeyed but only one proved to be a true follower, a true Christian. It is faith that makes you beautiful, frees you from all the ugliness that characterized you. Faith is when I listen to the word of God, when I say: "I trust, I follow him because it is what saves me". Now he can go to join his traveling companions and, with them, carry out the obedience that had been commanded of him, but it also becomes a provocation for them, a point of reflection on the truth of life.

For reflection:

- Do I feel different from others, separate, perhaps misunderstood? What makes me different? Am I proud of it or am I ashamed of it?
- What is my relationship with the rules, traditions, customs of my culture? Do I use them positively or, sometimes, do they become an excuse not to commit myself?
- How do I treat those who are different from me? Do I try to understand them or do I just judge them and push them away from me?
- Do I have the courage to make choices that allow me to be more true? Do I have the patience to wait and the constancy to keep going, until the fruits arrive?
- Am I grateful to God for all the graces and opportunities for good that he gives me, or do I take them for granted?

The Samaritans

Marginalization due to political reasons

A particular category of outcasts is represented by the Samaritans. They were part of Israel but they were foreigners and had a different way of understanding and practicing religion.

In sending his disciples to their first apostolic experience, Jesus tells them: “Do not go among the pagans and do not enter the cities of the Samaritans; go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Mt 10:5-6).

During the journey to Jerusalem, it happens that Jesus sends messengers ahead of him to provide for their needs. They walk and enter a village of Samaritans, but they do not want to receive him because they know he is headed for Jerusalem. (Lk 9,52-53)

Then when Jesus has to show how hard the hearts of many Jews who claim to be practicing are, he tells the parable of the robbed and wounded man who is ignored by the Levite and the priest while a Samaritan, who was travelling, saw him passing by and saw him had compassion. (Lk 10:33)

Then we have the episode of the ten lepers healed by Jesus, where only one of them, seeing himself healed, goes back praising God in a loud voice; and he throws himself at Jesus' feet to thank him. He was a Samaritan. (Lk 17:15-16).

In John 4 we have a dialogue between Jesus and the Samaritan

woman and it is she herself who says: "How come you, who are a Jew, ask me for a drink, who am a Samaritan woman?". The Gospel comments: “The Jews in fact do not maintain good relations with the Samaritans. (Jn 4,9)

In John we also find that one day Jesus' adversaries to despise him say to him "You are a Samaritan" (Jn 8:48) but Jesus does not answer; a few chapters earlier a village of Samaritans had welcomed him proclaiming him Savior of the world.

In all of these quoted passages we note that whenever the Samaritans are mentioned, a certain sense of division or struggle can be perceived between them and the Jews, almost as if they were foreigners or pagans. Even today, religious or geographical or political differences are taken as a means of contempt and hatred among people.

Why were the Samaritans despised? We need to look for the reasons in history. After the death of King Solomon, the kingdom was divided into two parts: the kingdom of Israel was created in the north with its capital in Samaria and the kingdom of Judah in the south with its capital in Jerusalem. Between the two kingdoms there was always hostility, just think that at the time of Isaiah (Is 7) the king of Israel asked the king of Syria for help to conquer Jerusalem.

In the year 721 BC Samaria is destroyed by the king of Assyria, the active people are deported and there are sent foreign people from Babylon and Kuta to mix with the rest. While in the North (Galilee), a country area, people had kept tied to ancient traditions because these foreigners did not arrive there, in Samaria, the mixing also led to changes in religion. We can get this information from the Bible. (2

Kings 17.5; 24ff).

According to a version of events given instead by Samaritan sources, the split arose before Samuel when Eli, a high priest at Silo, was jealous of Ussi, a high priest on Mount Garizim who they identified with Jacob's Bethel. So, the true Israelites (faithful to Jacob) were they and the schismatics were the Jews. The name "Samaritan" would derive from "somerim" = observant.

How did things go? There is probably some truth and some exaggeration in both versions. Looking at the religion observed by the Samaritans, it turns out to be much more rigorous and closer to the law of Moses than the official Jewish one. Here are some details about the Samaritans' beliefs:

First of all, they recognized only the 5 books of the Pentateuch as valid. All the other books of the Old Testament refer to events subsequent to the split, or in any case do not speak of Moses and therefore for them they were to be considered as deformations of the true law.

Second: they observed the law in a much more literal and therefore stricter way than the Jews, rejecting all the later applications introduced by the scribes and Pharisees, especially in matters of the Sabbath and ritual purity; The Easter rite is the one strictly described in Exodus; there was a strong exaltation of the figure of Moses the legislator, and the care for the purity of the race.

Third: They had built their own temple on Mount Gerizim saying that it is the only place mentioned by the Pentateuch (Dt 27,4-5 "Put these stones on Mount Gerizim and build an altar to the Lord"), while the construction of the Temple of Jerusalem is only tied to David. This

Temple was destroyed by King John Hyrcanus of Judah around 110 BC.

Furthermore, it must be kept in mind that when Ezra and Nehemiah tried to rebuild Jerusalem, Sanballat, governor of Samaria opposed the project.

You can therefore understand the strong incompatibility and mutual accusations that the two nations posed.

It is not surprising then the wonder of the Samaritan woman to see that Jesus speaks to her. Jesus really uses her to break down the barriers of hatred. Jesus meets the woman near the well that brings with it all the sacred memories (it is the well dug by Jacob and we are close to the sacred city of Shechem). Furthermore, in various biblical stories it is near a well that many tried to approach women like Jacob and Moses who meet the woman they will later marry.

Jesus is determined to break down the barriers of hatred. Not only is the person he meets a Samaritan woman, but also a woman and moreover irregular, that is, he accepts to be contaminated. All this scandalous reversal of religious customs takes place through a simple dialogue, a sign of God's simplicity and his action. Even divisions on what is sacred are overcome "indeed the time has come when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will God be worshiped, but in spirit and in truth". From now on, religion can no longer be a reason for division because the point of reference will no longer be a place but the salvation given by Jesus.

Here we should ask ourselves where did this teaching of Jesus go considering that in the name of religion we have waged so many wars and continue to create divisions and hatred.

The woman, full of enthusiasm, becomes a missionary to her villagers.

Starting from this position of separation, the Samaritans become an excellent example for Jesus to attack the inconsistency of the Jews and to make it clear that the salvation he brings goes far beyond the borders of Judea.

Today all those who are victims of geographical, linguistic or religious marginalization could be considered Samaritans. Divisions between North and South, between East and West, between Protestants and Catholics, between Muslims and Christians, non-EU citizens and Europeans.

The Christian should have the courage to immerse himself in these situations of marginalization.

For reflection:

- Are there particular categories of people that I find it hard to accept? What scares me about them?
- Can I accept those who have different ideas than mine, different traditions, different tastes?

The Women

A third category of marginalization that is worth analyzing is that represented by women. What is the novelty brought by Jesus in his relationship with women?

Let us first of all take a brief look at the condition of women in Jewish society in the time of Jesus.

The society was patriarchal, which means that man's power was absolute. The child was under the guardianship of the father until the time of marriage, which usually took place very early. If the father died, the authority passed to the older brother, not the mother. When she got engaged and married, she came under the guardianship of her husband. She would not appear in public unless fully veiled.

It was disdainful for a man to speak publicly with a woman, and if he had to do so he had to have witnesses with him. Rabbi Jose ben Johanan of the first century said: "Do not talk much with a woman, neither with your wife, much less with your neighbor's wife." "Whoever talks to a woman brings evil upon herself and will end up in Gehenna."

Consequently to this, women had no public rights: they could not repudiate their husband but could easily be repudiated by him; their testimony in court didn't count, so there weren't even calls; they were not required to go to the synagogue to pray or even to fulfill the obligations of the law, also because at that moment they could be

impure. In the temple in Jerusalem there was a courtyard reserved for them and they could not access that of men.

Every pious Jew recited this prayer three times a day: "Blessed be God that you did not give birth to me as a pagan,... that you did not give birth to me as a farmer,... that you did not give birth to me as a woman, because woman is not bound to keep the commandments."

There were, of course, noble or high-ranking women who allowed themselves to escape these restrictions.

Their task inside the house was to watch over religious purity in the food and sexual fields. Their duties away from home were to go and grind the grain and draw water from the well.

From all this we understand well the scandal of the disciples when they see Jesus talking to a woman at the well.

We can see some evangelical passages. Of all four evangelists, the one who most emphasizes the role of women in Jesus' life is John. This is perhaps because he is the latest and therefore things have already changed a bit, or perhaps because the community where he is when he writes, in Asia Minor, is more open.

Here is a list of the various women who appear in the Gospels.

The Gospel of Matthew

Mt 2 In the Genealogy of Jesus, 3 women appear.

Mt 9,18 ff. The hemorrhagic woman and the resurrection of the notable's daughter

Mt 15:21 The Canaanite

Mt 26:6 The sinner anointing Jesus' feet.

Mt 28.1 The two Mary at the tomb

The Gospel of Mark.

In the Gospel of Mark there are 5 women. They are always fragile and needy people, but they are presented as models for the disciples. Let's see them:

Mc 1,28-31 Peter's mother-in-law. She was in bed sick. Well, as soon as she is touched by her, Jesus gets up and puts himself at her service. She is an example of love in the meaning of her service.

Mk 5,25-34 The hemorrhagic woman. She too is sick. She is ashamed to be seen and to ask, she wants to touch secretly. As soon as she touches Jesus she is healed, but Jesus makes her come forward and presents her as a model of faith. In this episode there is also the resurrection of the daughter of Jairus.

Mk 7,24-30 The Siro Phoenicia. She's not even Jewish and she needs a miracle for her sick daughter. Although she is not a believer, she shows a trust in Jesus superior to that of all the Jews. It too is shown as an example of faith.

Mc 12,41-44 The widow at the temple. She is poor and gives very small almsgiving. She is placed in comparison with the rich and powerful scribes and is presented as an example of the love that she gives all of herself to God.

Mc 14,3-9 The woman who anoints Jesus' head. She exposes herself to everyone's criticism for the action also because she wastes all that money on oil. It too is presented as an example of love that spares no expense, gives everything.

So, we have two examples of faith and three of love.

Mk 16.1 The Magdalene, Mary of James and Salomé at the tomb.

The Gospel of Luke

Luke 1-2 Mary, the Mother of Jesus

Lk 1,29-58 Elizabeth

Lk 2,36-38 Anna prophesies about Jesus in the temple

Lk 4,38-39 Peter's mother-in-law

Lk 7,11ff The widow of Naim

Lk 8,1-3 Some women follow Jesus

Lk 8,40 ff The hemorrhagic woman and the daughter of Jairus

Lk 10,38 ff Martha and Mary invite Jesus to their home

Luke 13.10 Healing of the crooked woman

Luke 18.1ff. Parable of the judge and the persistent widow

Luke 21.1 The widow who throws coins into the temple

Lk 23,27ff Women along the way to Calvary and at the foot of the cross

24.1 The women at the tomb

The Gospel of John

Jn 2 Mary the mother of Jesus at the wedding in Cana

Jn 4 The Samaritan woman

Jn 8 The adulteress

Jn 11 Martha and Mary and the raising of Lazarus

Jn 12 Mary and the anointing of Bethany

Jn 19 Mary the mother of Jesus at the foot of the Cross

Jn 20 The Magdalene at the tomb

Before presenting some of these figures, let's summarize here

some points that will emerge from these analyses:

First of all, we note the singularity and transgressiveness of Jesus' behavior which breaks all patriarchal schemes.

The woman is no longer locked up in the house but she goes out and goes with him around Palestine (Luke 8,2).

She also knows how to act and behave independently of man (Lk 10:38).

She too assumes responsibility and apostolic action (Jn 4:28).

Finally, perfect communication is now possible between men and women without mutual fear or distrust.

The woman removed from marginalization can free her charge of faith and love, dedication and identification, with the person and mission of Jesus, and therefore she can rediscover her true identity in the new Christian community.

This path of women's liberation started by Jesus has found a long and difficult path to follow over the centuries. Until a few years ago the demands for equal rights had harsh responses in society.

Pope John Paul II said in 12-4-1993: "The mission entrusted to women ... is rooted in the depths of her personal being, which, while uniting her with men in dignity, distinguishes her from him for the specific riches of femininity. ... The evangelical message on the dignity and vocation of women meets today with a new cultural sensitivity that ... has rightly rediscovered the value of femininity and is progressively doing justice to unacceptable discrimination and reacting to ancient and new, obvious forms and hidden, of violence against women."

For reflection:

- If you are a man: How do you feel about women? Can you recognize their equal rights and opportunities?
- If you are a woman: can you recognize the value of diversity and put the characteristics of your femininity at the service of society?
- Are you able to collaborate with people of the opposite sex, with freedom and respect?

The Samaritan woman. (Jn. 4)

From marginalized to Apostle

We have already mentioned this when speaking of the condition of the Samaritans.

The passage presents us with three cases of marginalization.

The first marginalization is the cultural and social one given by the fact that it is a woman who meets Jesus. In Jesus' day, women were forbidden from any social interaction. Women had to stay at home to take care of household chores and children; the only way out was to go to the well to get water. So the village well became the meeting place.

The second marginalization is the political one given by the fact that she was a Samaritan woman. The Samaritans were considered heretics because of their way of believing and also invaders because they were not originally from the place but had been sent there some centuries earlier to weaken the pride of the Jewish people.

The third marginalization is the moral one given by the situation of the woman who has had five husbands and the one she lives with today is not her husband.

Women usually went to the well in the morning when the weather was cooler, water was more plentiful, and so they had water available for household chores and for cooking. At the time it happened that various women were there and therefore it was an

opportunity to have a chat with each other. The fact that this woman goes there at noon indicates her desire not to meet other people. So Jesus should have avoided any interaction with her and she had every reason to avoid speaking to Jesus, a man and a Jew. But Jesus fights against any form of marginalization and always does so by acting on the marginalized person, helping them to rebuild their value and self-image. The way used by Jesus is interesting: he doesn't start with a sermon or a catechesis or even with pointing out the woman's mistakes, topics that need to be touched on and he does it at a later time. He places the woman in an advantageous position, in the possibility of helping. He doesn't say «Woman, you need me» but he says: «Woman, I need you because I'm thirsty». He does not say «I am a savior» but he says: «I am a thirsty person unable to fetch water by myself». This displaces the woman's preconceptions and opens the door for her to touch on her weaknesses and needs.

The turning point occurs when the woman has the courage to admit her deepest weakness: I have no husband; and her religious malaise. Jesus completely demolishes barriers by recognizing those weaknesses, not with a spirit of criticism but neither by pretending that the problems do not exist. He has the spirit of someone who starts from the truth to build social redemption.

In the end the woman, now recovered, leaves aside what was her sign of social inclusion, the jug, and runs to the people to preach. Marginalized, she redeems herself by becoming an apostle to her marginalizers.

Even today there are many cases of marginalization in our society. Not only immigrants who find it difficult to be accepted because they

are foreigners, of different languages and religions, but also the poor, the exploited, the elderly. We find ourselves in a society that places well-being at the center, where those who produce, those who are active and those who can contribute have value. The person is evaluated by "how much he can give me" against "how much it costs me". At the center there is no longer the person with his right as a creature of God and his dignity as a human person but at the center there is the self, my well-being, my tranquility, and everything is in function of that.

Jesus' request is interesting: "Give me a drink". It is not only an opening of weakness and appreciation of the other as we said above, it is also a real thirst, the same thirst that Jesus will express from the cross: "I thirst!" which is thirst for souls, thirst to want to save that person in front of him, to bring him back to his Father. We meet the other, the needy in a true and effective way when we get out of our selfishness and let ourselves be taken by the desire to do good, by the strong emotion that arises from seeing God's plan at work in every person, even the smallest and most marginalized. There are therefore three things that will save the world: faith that makes us see God in everyone, letting ourselves be carried away by the desire to do good, humility in setting up relationships and actions.

When we walk the streets of our city, let us look around and see how many people feel marginalized, not accepted, not valued, abandoned or betrayed, let us approach them humbly and bring them a word of hope: God loves them and is He has come to redeem them, and he wants to do it through us.

For reflection:

- How do I feel when I reflect on my weaknesses?
- Do I feel judged by others? How do I behave in front of them?
- Can I recognize who is ashamed? Can I work to reintegrate him into society?

The bleeding lady and the daughter of Jairus

(Mk 5: 25-34)

Losing the meaning of life and experiencing inutility and helplessness

Once again, to understand the episode well, it is necessary to analyze it in the place it occupies in the Gospel. We are immediately after the episode of the demoniac of Gerasa. There the invitation had been to consider that everything in our life must be subordinated to the saving encounter with the Lord.

In today's passage there is a strange, unique fact: the text does not present a simple episode but two of them, one inserted in the other. To understand the underlying theme, which is the same for both episodes, you have to read them together. The central topic is life in all its aspects: physical but also moral and meaning. Life is precious, but it finds its true meaning only in the encounter with Christ.

What are the elements that unite these two episodes? First of all, the fact that they are nestled into each other. If they were two separate things, the gospels would have made two separate accounts of them. The gospels never have a pure chronological purpose, but a thematic one, they always speak of salvation, so they don't mind

moving things here and there if this helps to better convey the message. Second, both episodes are about life. One thing that we have to keep in mind is that in the Jewish mentality blood represents life, in fact one could only eat the flesh of an animal after they were sure that all the blood had come out. If one touched somebody's else blood, he would become impure and for three days, he could not enter the temple to pray despite the purification's ablutions. So a woman who has been losing blood for many years is a woman who, for many years, has been losing her life, or rather the meaning of life, the purpose of life. She is not alive but she survives, she is a walking corpse just like the little girl who is now a sleeping corpse. Contact with Jesus restores life, blocks losses, and restarts vital processes.

There are many other aspects too, that putting them in parallel:

- they are two women; 12 years of age (she has reached sufficient maturity to be able to get engaged for a marriage, open up to true life, and instead she dies) or 12 years of illness (the same period of lack of true life and therefore the moment to die or begin to truly live;
- the verb to touch. Jesus touches the dead girl and is touched by a bleeding woman. Touch indicates impurity;
- the crowd which becomes an obstacle to the meeting;
- the prostration of the woman and of the father in front of Jesus.

Let's start with the woman. We have here a woman who has been bleeding for twelve years. Physically speaking, it could have been a problem with her menstruation periods, or some wound that would not heal. The episode is undoubtedly to be read metaphorically:

Twelve indicates a whole life, a complete number. We have already mentioned blood as the seat of life, so this woman has been losing blood for years and is losing her life or rather the meaning of it. She went to consult many doctors but to no avail. These are not only medical doctors but many who pass themselves off as life experts. How many of our young people, after the first years of catechism and as altar boys, little by little abandon religious practice and faith? They are attracted by the illusions of the heroes of sports, entertainment, the world of movies, they are attracted to easy money, they are attracted to the group of friends that indicates easy pleasure through smoking, drugs, sex, wild and unbridled life . They feel free and full of life, and instead, they are inexorably emptying themselves. When they realize they are wrong, they find themselves lost and it is difficult to get back on track and restore the meaning of their life. Well, this woman has found hope, she has heard of an extraordinary man, a friend of sinners, of the poor, one who does not judge but who has words of fire and she, cold inside, needs this fire. How to present oneself in front of such an important person, she who is so unworthy? How to present her case? How to talk about topics so private and so taboo? What should to say? Lack of self-confidence and discouragement are common feelings among those who have reached the bottom, feelings that inexorably block them there, that prevent them from getting on the road. The devil traps us with a thousand excuses, he can't afford that we escape from him. The woman, instead, starts moving, "if only I could touch the hem of his cloak"; it is a sense of unworthiness but also a glimmer of hope: better than nothing. Half the healing is already done, because she has

found a minimum of meaning in life. So then, as soon as she touches the cloak, the flow of blood already stops. It's not yet a healing, because the encounter with Christ was on a one way, but it's an important beginning. There are people who are ashamed to show that they go back to the Church and therefore seek more anonymous contacts, perhaps through readings, going to places where they are not known. This is a start, but it is not enough. Jesus wants everything, he really wants to save us, he wants to give us foundations from which we don't risk falling back. So, he wants the person to come out: "Who touched me?" The humble declaration "it was me" is as good as a profession of faith and the woman is raised as a sign of God's mercy.

Now we come to the little girl. The delay caused by the episode of the hemorrhagic woman is sufficient for the child to die and the messengers come with this message.

This episode, as we can see on other occasions, hinges on the relationship between three groups: a person in need (the paralytic, the possessed, the child, the bleeding); those who intercede for him (those who carry the stretcher, the devil who asks to be spared, and here the father of the little girl and his companions) who show faith and initiative; the third group is formed by those who stand around, do not believe and express their lack of faith (the Pharisees who criticize, the herdsmen who hunt Jesus and here, those present who mock him).

The first place must naturally be given to the needy. The episodes always represent a situation of incapacity, almost an impossibility to find a normal life. Here the girl even died. Humanly speaking there is

no solution. It is a pitiful case as the death of a loved one and especially a child always is. She was 12 years old. In the bible, 12 is always a symbolic number, a number of completeness. So, the 12 years represent all ages of life. Furthermore, at the age of 12 we become adults, the boys were inserted into society (remember Jesus who for the first time at the age of 12 went down to Jerusalem with his family), for the girls it was the time to begin to look around for a spouse, and the mother would begin to train her daughter in the art of managing the house and the family. So, it is a life that already has its completeness but that is also open to a new cycle. Well, this life is broken. All illusions, plans, collapsed. So, it's not just a problem for her, but for the whole family, so the father himself starts moving.

The movement and the initiative of these family members represents faith, which is never a static thing, but which always has a double element: absolute dependence on God, initiative and action; as if everything depends on God, but everything also depends on us. This is something to keep in mind as we reflect on our relationship with God, and also as we teach people to pray. Only God works miracles and we must believe in this, abandon ourselves to his will, not with the certainty that God will do what we ask for, but with the certainty that God will do what is best for us. But there is also the second aspect, namely the activity that derives from faith. We must set out, go and seek this God who works miracles, get busy so that He can work in us, fight against all those external aspects that would like to take away our faith. It is an active work, but we must not act as protagonists; it is a joyful work because we know there will be a solution, even if we don't know which one.

The faith of these people is also precious because it brings with it another value: love. They are people who suffer with those who are sick or dead, and they suffer because they love them. Jesus cannot remain indifferent to this pain which is love. He then walks with them and helps them go through the purification of the unbelief of others.

And here we enter the third group: the unbelievers. Sometimes they are spectators, capable only of watching and judging, in this case, they are friends, neighbors, people who loved the child and came to share the pain. Their problem is that they are immobilized, closed in on their pessimism and their fatalism. To tell the truth, the text says that they were agitated and cried, but their movement is not that of someone looking for a solution, but of someone who, instead, with his pessimism, increases the pain. They love the little girl and her parents, but they don't do anything, they just stand there crying. They remind me of so many people who hang out on Facebook. They think they are alive because they "like" all the posts that refer to social problems of all kinds, maybe they copy and share some, but their activity is all there, and if we look at their posts, they are full of criticism and references to inconsistencies, cheating, corruption. There is nothing constructive, creative, or new about growth. They are still, because their love is not supported by faith. Once off the computer, they're back in the real world and routine, and Facebook posts have made no difference. Faith does not consist of saying in words that we believe in God, but in having an internal certainty that God has a solution for us too. Then there is no place for pessimism, there is no place for immobilism. Faith is a diesel engine that takes a bit of effort to start, but once it starts, it needs to run continuously

and if it stops for a long time, it jams.

Christ restores life to the little girl. Attention! I would not use the term resurrection but return to life. The little girl goes back to doing what she did before, to stay with the people she used to, and, like everyone else, she will grow up, she will get sick, get well and eventually die (like Lazarus and the son of Naim's widow). The resurrection is that of Jesus who returns to life, but in a different, glorious, definitive way, so as not to leave it again; this last is promised to all of us. The little girl, after her death, had entered eternity and therefore she was even better. Her resuscitation benefits her relatives and friends more than her. This resuscitation, however, is already a sign of the future resurrection. It makes us see that we are still attached to this world and that we still need to purify ourselves. In fact, if we notice the timing well, Jesus lets the little girl die; when the father comes to him, the little girl is still alive, Jesus could have done a distant healing, as he had done on another occasion with the centurion who had told him: "I am not worthy that you enter my house". He will do the same with Lazarus, because he does not answer the call of his sisters until after his friend's death. On that occasion he says: "This death is not for itself, but for the glory of God". Jesus allows the little girl to die because, on the one hand, it makes no difference to him whether she is sick or dead, but also because he wants to teach all those people that he is the Lord of life. Real life is meaningless without him. The grief of the surrounding people and their disbelief emphasize their limitation, not yet understanding the truth. They mock him because they are closed in their smallness. If there weren't this profound meaning, Jesus would

have done an injustice in letting her die and he would do an injustice every time he lets young people or children die, or every time people of faith pray for healing and do not get it.

Jesus suggests to the parents to feed the little girl, a sign of her return to normal life, but also, perhaps, a reminder of what he will say later: "I am the bread of life, whoever eats me will never die."

We often find ourselves in one of these three positions.

Sometimes we are ill or afflicted by other types of suffering: physical, spiritual, moral, emotional, and we do not understand the meaning of what is happening, the meaning life has in those conditions. We are looking for a solution to the problem: what solution?

Sometimes we work or pray for others, but we seem to be working in vain, praying in vain, because we don't see any results from our efforts: what results do we expect?

Our service to the sick must be marked by faith, because human involvement is not enough, nor is the work we do, nor is it enough to pray so that these people, or ourselves, have the human solution that we would all expect. Our priority must be to seek the true meaning of life, the quality that is not given by the environment or accessories, but by the union of mind and heart with the One who gives true meaning.

Our commitment cannot be only in seeking a solution, but also and above all, in witnessing and teaching the ultimate meaning, the ultimate solution, the ultimate "Solutor".

For reflection:

- Do we trust that God can cure our shortcomings and weaknesses, even those we have carried with us for years?
- What do we do to go to Him for healing?
- Do we encourage people to seek God or perhaps, with our words and our attitude, do we become a reason for discouragement?

The Cananean woman

(Mt 15: 21-28)

Being foreigner (marginalization and prejudice often are not caused by our mistakes)

There is a curious thing in the Gospel: there are two miracles performed at a distance, both at the request of pagans (the healing of the daughter of the Canaanite woman and of the servant of the Roman centurion). In both cases it is clearly said that they are made because, although the applicants are pagans, they show greater faith than many of the believers.

To understand the true meaning of the episode of the Cananean woman, let's take a brief overview of the events that took place in the same chapter 15 of Matthew. Some Scribes and Pharisees come from Jerusalem to investigate Jesus, considered a dangerous character. What reproach do they make? He neglects ritual purifications, but mostly teaches people to do the same. Jewish law has very strict and precise prescriptions in this regard. Coming into contact with impure people meant being contaminated, therefore becoming unworthy of God and of his blessings, therefore one could not pray nor even take food, unless he had first purified himself, washed all the items he was using, etc. What made him impure was touching some animals considered impure, such as dogs and pigs, but also touching people with bleeding wounds, lepers and finally entertaining pagans. Israelites have always considered themselves

the only people chosen by the Lord, the only one worthy of his blessings; to mix with pagans meant the temptation of accepting their gods and their laws.

Jesus knows this mentality well, because both he and his disciples grew up in it, and he knows how false and dangerous it is, so he immediately got rid of it; if you remember he was driven out of Nazareth because he had cited two examples from the Old Testament that spoke of miracles performed in favor of pagans: Elijah who allowed himself to be welcomed by the widow of Sidon and provided food for her and her son; Elisha healing Naaman the Syrian. Jesus does not accept that barriers are created, which prevent people from coming into contact with God and experiencing his love for him. Clinging to the exteriority of the law is the attitude that most angers Jesus; he is interested in the adhesion of the heart and not the formality, in fact, he attacks the Scribes reproaching them for following the prescriptions of the law and then eluding, with various stratagems, the most important precepts such as that of respecting the parents or the one of helping the poor.

To provoke his disciples to reflect, he leads them into pagan territory. Our episode takes place there. A Canaanite woman with a demon-possessed daughter approaches him. She represents the pagan world still possessed by the devil, but which is in search of God. The strange way of acting of Jesus can be understood only if we put in the foreground, not so much the miracle itself, but the teaching that Jesus wants to give to his disciples. What is Faith? Who can say he truly believes? Only Jews? With his attitude, Jesus forces the apostles to get in touch with these "pagans" to show them that in the

new religion God is the God of all and has believers even among non-Jews.

Jesus' first reaction is detached; he does not respond to the woman, behavior that Jesus never had on other occasions, but which obliges the disciples to come and ask Him to grant her request. They are annoyed by the woman and want to get rid of her. Now that the dialogue on the subject is open, he pronounces very strong words that sound strange in the mouth of Jesus. "I was sent only for the children of Israel"; "It is not good to give children's bread to little dogs". Reading them in the light of what we said at the beginning of this chapter, we understand that they are not directed to the woman to justify a refusal, but to the Apostles, to make them understand that these phrases, so common in their language and in their culture, must now come up against the fact that, while the Jews are about to reject Jesus, the pagans are welcoming him.

With his way of behaving, Jesus lays bare three wrong attitudes in our way of relating to the poor, attitudes typical of the apostles and of the entire Jewish world of that time, but also of many Christians today: indifference, feeling uncomfortable or annoyed, withdrawing into the shell of one's relatives and acquaintances. The woman responds to Jesus' provocations with trust (she asks), insistence (she really needs and cares about her daughter's situation), and humility (she is not offended by feeling compared to dogs). Those are the attitudes Jesus wants to instill in his disciples and the lady becomes a good instrument in his hands.

The final sentence of Jesus "Woman, great is your faith", is the hardest blow for the Apostles. In the previous chapter, Jesus had

turned to Peter and told him: "How small is your faith!"

We often confuse faith with other things. Someone says: "I have faith because I pray, because I go to mass"; someone else says: “I believe it, in fact, all this makes sense, it seems right to me”. There is, therefore, the danger of exchanging faith either with the external practices we do, or with the internal taste we feel for it. In the Gospel, on the other hand, faith is something that always concerns the Word of Christ, the knowledge that it is effective. We believe in the efficacy of the Word because we believe in the power of the speaker, regardless of what he says.

Returning to the discussion on the three wrong attitudes that we often have, it is natural for me to think of many situations in which we feel provoked by people in need. We often feel indifference towards them, we deny their stories and needs; Other times, however, we feel annoyed because we are disturbed by their needs and requests, and this causes us to reject them; another attitude we could have is that of withdrawing into ourselves, concentrating on our needs, on our comfort; this last attitude leads to wrong judgments about the other, using standard patterns for condemning him (he is lazy, he is a drunkard, he is a cheater, etc.).

The Canaanite woman becomes an example for us to follow. We are not Christians because the Gospel is better than any other book, in fact there are many who say they are "believers" and deny parts of Jesus' teachings in the name of human reasoning made by politicians or men of different cultures, without questioning in the slightest which is the meaning of certain teachings of the Gospel. They are based only on human and emotional investigations and thoughts.

But faith isn't either in blindly putting into practice what I was taught by my father and mother and which, all in all, I like. Faith requires continuous adherence to Christ as a person, recognizing his continuous presence among us 24 hours a day, accepting that often what he asks of us may seem strange and unnatural, but in the end it has always proved to be the only right thing, because everything God does, he does because he loves us.

St. James, in his letter, says that faith is not true unless it is transformed into charity, openness to others, because it is there that we concretely encounter the God we believe in, and it is there that He wants us to demonstrate our faith.

Then, when we have the courage to have this experience, we discover that often those people whom we previously judged negatively, show that they have a much better faith than we do.

For reflection:

- How do we feel when we have to deal with foreigners, especially if we are at home?
- How do we feel when we have to deal with people of other religions, especially if it involves topics that in some way involve our faith?
- How do we feel and behave when we are faced with people who have ideas that are different from ours and who question the integrity of our way of thinking?

The curved woman *(Lk 13:10-17)*

Inability to present yourself on the same level as others; feeling inferior

The environment in which this miracle takes place is the same as the one we have analyzed when speaking of the man with the withered hand, in a synagogue, during a Sabbath day. It is therefore necessary to review what we have already said on these two topics.

From a first sight, it would seem that the main argument is still that of the value of the Sabbath, but here Jesus introduces a new aspect: the healed person is a woman, a bent over woman. On various trips to India and Africa I have seen elderly women walk bent at 90 degrees and unable to straighten themselves, probably due to the many burdens they had to carry in their youth.

Here, this curvature takes on a deeper symbolic aspect: here it is not only this woman who is bent, but the whole female world that she represents and which is bent due to the culture and mentality that takes away their fundamental rights and reduces them to slaves.

We have already spoken extensively about the situation of women.

We may be surprised that this woman is present in the synagogue on Sabbath day. She was probably out the door begging. Jesus takes advantage of it and puts her in the midst of society.

Pay attention to the terms used:

The woman had a spirit that kept her "infirm" (unable to act) and "bent" (humiliated).

Jesus "called her to himself," a verb that scandalizes because it implies relationship and direct involvement. He doesn't make her a phenomenon to show, as he did with the man with the withered hand; today he has a more delicate, more intimate attitude.

“You are freed”: not healed, because there is nothing wrong or diseased in her, what keeps her enslaved is something external, a spirit, a label, the mentality, the culture; Jesus frees her.

"The leader of the synagogue, addressing the crowd said". He doesn't have the courage to face Jesus directly, he prefers to do something that gets around the problem, escapades, as we often do. He scolds people because he has power over them, he realizes he has none over Jesus.

"The Lord replied." The gospel is using the word “Lord”, it's something strong and official. Jesus does not stand aside, he is not even satisfied with having cured the woman, he also wants to involve everyone present and force them to reflect on their convictions, undermine their way of believing, to open up to a new, more evangelical one.

“You untie the donkey or the ox, and this daughter of Abraham”? They considered the woman of less value than the donkey or the ox, while Jesus calls her “daughter of Abraham”, that is, our sister, part of the family, of equal dignity.

"Her opponents were ashamed." Shame is to recognize being in a wrong position in front of someone else. It is a negative attitude. The person feels blocked, judged, and in danger. These are the consequences that hang over us when we act or take refuge in a wrong positions.

Everything here indicates Jesus' will for a complete liberation and revaluation of women giving them equal dignity of men. On the other hand, we see all the resistance of the people, of the society that is

afraid of this freedom that requires responsibility.

This woman also represents the situation of many people who are still held slaves today. Let us think of the exploited children, the marginalized poor, the elderly left alone, the sick who are neglected. Think of how many divisions we create in the name of language, culture, and religion. When we create a division, we imprison the other person in our mental schemes and then an equal relationship is no longer possible. Today Jesus asks us to overcome every division, reject every label, open up to every person, especially those who for some reason repel us.

For reflection:

- Do we respect everyone's dignity?
- How do we feel in front of people of the opposite sex, in front of the sick, in front of beggars?
- Do we do anything to promote the other or do we just give alms? Will our charity elevate or humiliate the recipient?
- -Jesus does not consider the person for his sins or his origin or history, but for his need for the Father's mercy. How much do we let ourselves be influenced by prefabricated labels, as an excuse not to get involved?

The adulteress (Jn. 8:1-12)

The everlasting fight between hypocrisy and mercy.

This episode is very beautiful, because it is the best example of what mercy can do. This passage is commonly called: the episode of the adulteress, but I would call it: the clash between mercy and hypocrisy.

Adultery was considered one of the gravest sins, because it broke families. Often, the women who were chased away by their husbands could not return to their family of origin, because what happened to them brought dishonor. So many of them would end up in the street and the only way to survive was to beg or prostitute. Of course, the blame was placed entirely on the women, the men were only the victims of their magic power in alluring them, a mentality unfortunately still very much alive today in many parts of the world. This was a serious infraction in a society firmly based on families and clans; then someone, more rigorous in observing the law, would come and ask for the woman's death by stoning, something reserved only for sins such as blasphemy (breaking of the bond with God) and betrayal (breaking of the bond with society).

This misdeed represented the ideal "case" for compromising a young master like Jesus, putting him in an ambiguous position that would ruin his fame and the attraction he exercised over the crowd. Everyone knew well that Jesus' preaching was based on mercy and

this impressed people who were not lean to the rigor of the law. What would he say in front of a case like this?

So, the central point of this passage is not the sin or adultery itself, but the attempt, based on human reasoning and contradictions, made by the Pharisees to diminish the attraction of Christ, the attachment to his preaching. The Pharisees were cunning and experienced and were ready to strike the blow. Perhaps some of them, pretending to mistake, would have more willingly thrown the stone at Jesus than at the woman.

If Jesus had pronounced himself in favor of stoning the woman, what would have happened to his reputation as merciful? Furthermore, since the time of the conquest by the Romans, the permission of the Jews to pronounce death sentences had been taken away, therefore Jesus would have placed himself in a position of rebel, which he, by nature a peacemaker, had so far succeeded to avoid. If, on the other hand, he had pronounced himself in favor of forgiveness, he would have created scandal, confusion among the people because the sin was clear, the woman had been caught red-handed. No one was willing to justify this type of crime.

The attitude of Jesus is interesting, who, as usual, avoids the trap by playing sideways. Jewish justice was founded on a basic concept: every crime, to be punished, must be proven by the testimony of at least two people. Now, the important thing was not so much being able to prove that what they said was true, but rather proving that these two people were credible, honest people, not compromised by ulterior motives or gains. Jesus plays on this: everyone knew that the fact itself was true, but those who were there shouting, were they

really honest people? He bends down to write on the ground, almost bent over by the inner suffering of seeing so much hypocrisy and so much false fervor that only served to cover up the rotten morals that each of them carried with themselves. He knows very well that the object of the dispute is not the woman, but his very person. He starts writing, it doesn't matter what, but the fact of making them wait, of not immediately giving the answer they want, makes people nervous and destabilizes them from the safe platform they had built for themselves with their plan. Then he counterattacks: whoever is without sin, whoever believes he is an honest witness with no ulterior motives, no second gains, no skeletons in the closet, cast the first stone. He reversed the process. He sent them the ball of judgment but starting with an analysis of themselves. Now under accusation is no longer the woman's mistake, nor the possible sentence of Jesus but the moral integrity of all present. Whoever had thrown the stone would have declared himself just, but would also have submitted to the judgment of all who knew him and who could accuse him of mistakes. Then everyone leaves.

Jesus pretends not to pay attention to what is happening, the moral struggle is first of all a private matter for each one, and only after everyone has gone away, thus recognizing that they are not perfect, can Jesus approach the woman, and, starting from the danger escaped, he can send her a message of forgiveness, but also of conversion: I don't condemn you either (yet he was honest and credible), go and sin no more.

The mercy of Jesus is not a denial of the existence of error, nor a belittling of its value or scope, it is not respectability or an attitude of

moral laxity, it is placing the person at the center, with her weaknesses, but also with her dignity as a daughter. He is giving her a second chance, because love and relationships are more important than the facts themselves.

Mercy cannot be conceived, if we do not start from our own weakness, from the contradictory desires that fight against each other within us, which perhaps rarely translate into sin, but often remain repressed within us and rob us of the serenity of life, the clarity of judgment and lead us to judge others ruthlessly.

I believe that the people of the Gospel leaving, together with their anger at the defeat, also brought with them a slightly more benevolent look towards that poor woman whom they didn't feel like hitting with the stones they had already prepared with care.

What about us? The question that the Gospel asks us today, for our conversion, is not so much whether we are adulterers or not, but whether at times we allow ourselves to be caught up in the need to judge others, to condemn them, to challenge the law and tradition, to defend our ideas by putting others down. Are we sure that this false rectitude is perhaps not dictated by the dissatisfaction of knowing that there is so much in us that is not good and that we prefer to avoid, that we try to cover up with the mistakes of others? We should rather have the courage to take hold of what is wrong with us and deliver it to the mercy of Jesus.

Would we be able to bow down to a sinner who annoys us, and humbly say: "I too am a sinner like you, but God's mercy is great, let us walk together in search of this love"?

For reflection:

- How do we feel about sinners and people who do evil? (anger or compassion? Condemnation or forgiveness?)
- What are the mistakes that we find most difficult to accept in others? By any chance do they have anything to do with any of our past experiences in that area?
- How quick are we to judge others guilty or innocent? Do we try to know in depth all the reasons that may have pushed someone to act, before judging him?

Part II

Jesus the Master

In this second part, I have collected other characters present in the Gospels. They do not belong to the marginalized groups listed above. Somehow, they can be considered disciples of Jesus. The meeting with him has changed their life, and it is exactly their way of following Jesus that can teach us something, so that we too can lie better our being disciples of such a great Master.

Joseph and Mary

The discovery of our vocation

Mary, for her role and her lifestyle, deserves a whole book of reflections. In this chapter I wanted to consider only her aspect as a woman, mother and wife, who found herself involved in the such of such a special son.

The Gospel presents us with some moments that Mary had to share with Joseph, her husband, in carrying out their mission as "Parents" - educators of Jesus. I don't want to talk so much about the honor given to both by God in having chosen them, but of their human side, of their having placed themselves in the humble service of God, and of how they felt as "persons".

I imagine Mary as a young girl, 15-16 years old, silent, hardworking, always at home, except when she has to fetch water from the well. According to the customs of the time and of religion, she agrees to be betrothed, to start a family, even though in her heart she has the secret desire to be only for God and remain a virgin.

I imagine Joseph, instead, as a pious young man, a good believer, a good worker, a good friend. Like all young people of his time, he must have had plans for his life: starting a family, having children, developing his job, having a quiet life. Everything seemed to go well, he had managed to get engaged to the best, sweetest, most docile

girl in the village: Mary.

Marriage, in the time of Jesus, was celebrated in two stages. The first consisted of the contract between the two families, which the spouses accepted and signed. From that moment the two were husband and wife, but they did not go to live together for at least a year, first of all because they were young and their respective parents had to instruct them in family duties, but also because the two families had to get to know each other better and ensure that things would be fine. After about a year the two could live together. In this first year the contract could still be dissolved and everyone would have understood the problem as that the two families either discovered that they would not be able to fulfill conveniently the agreement, or had seen that the choice was wrong. There was nothing shameful about it. So the two could talk to each other and start planning their lives. In our case, Joseph learns from Mary that she accepts the marriage, but she wants to remain a virgin. What family will be theirs without children? Then suddenly Mary's unexpected pregnancy arrives, therefore there will be a son, but not his son and moreover, always according to what Mary says, the Son of God. He was a "righteous" man, as the Gospel says, and now he is faced with the biggest dilemma of his life: can he go ahead with the marriage? Here we have to pay attention to a very common but wrong idea that many Christians have. Joseph is certainly not distressed by the doubt that Mary has been unfaithful. The most logical thing is to think that, since the two were already in fact married and met and talked, he learned from Mary that a son had been begotten by God in her. The term "just man" with which Joseph

is called indicates that he is a man who only wants to do God's will and obey the law, but he does not know and cannot understand what God wants from him. There are many aspects that discourage him: God's holiness is something to be feared; there is an absolute ban on seeing and touching him, but he must welcome him into the house. There is also the law that says that he should officially declare that the child is not his, but no one would believe the story of a divine pregnancy. This is the reason for which he decides to repudiate Mary in secret. How could this fact remain secret, since everyone could see that Mary was pregnant? He simply doesn't want to expose her to a public show, expose a problem in front of everyone that he can't solve. Then the right word is not "repudiate her", but "set her free". It is as he would say: “I leave my wife free because I don't know where to place myself, I don't know what God wants from me; He, the Almighty will take care of the situation.” As a man, according to the law, he doesn't need to give others reasons for repudiating her. So Joseph doesn't doubt Mary, but he doubts himself, his ability to take on this responsibility. "If God has different plans, let his will be done and I, a weak and unworthy man, step aside".

But no, the angel says: "God needs you. You must name this child, protect him, give him an education, prepare him for his great mission".

Like a good dad, he will have begun to fix up the house, like a good carpenter to prepare a crib, while Mary, not only would take care of her health so that the child does not run unnecessary risks, but will have begun to prepare some clothes, plan something. But the way of God is again different: they have to leave everything behind and set

off on a dangerous and tiring journey that could jeopardize the birth of the child and the health of the mother. In Bethlehem, the city of Joseph's ancestors and relatives, there should be a safe place. No one, instead, wants to take responsibility and the commitment to welcome a woman who has now arrived at the time of childbirth. Rejected by those who were supposed to help them, they are once again alone, and have to settle for a stable. But actually, they are not alone. Shepherds begin to arrive to visit Jesus and they speak of extraordinary events such as angels who announced the coming of the Savior. The shepherds will have admired the child, congratulated the mother and, perhaps, looked contemptuously at Joseph: "Are you the Father? Aren't you ashamed? Is this all you can offer your wife and child? What is it? Aren't you able to work, that you can't even offer a house?". The fame of this birth grows and even strange and important people like the Magi arrive, and finally even King Herod seems to be interested in them, but to kill them, and it's again up to Joseph, to go against the king and save "his" family. They have to go down to Egypt, a country of which they do not know the language, the traditions, where they have no footholds, where there is no true religion. They have to educate this child without the help of the synagogue, the elders, the relatives.

Whoever places himself in God's hands with simplicity, must accept his plans, but above all, must accept that he will always be an unworthy instrument. Herein lies the greatness of Mary and Joseph: in being able to give up their ideas and plans to make room for the ones of God.

After a few years in Egypt, they return to Nazareth and resume

their peaceful life as carpenters. Then Joseph disappears to leave room for Jesus, to allow the intimacy between Mother and Son to grow. Mary has an important role to play, even after Jesus' death, so it is right that she spends more time with him.

This is the message I want to leave you with this chapter: the two greatest people in the history of salvation showed their greatness in humility, availability, ability to adapt, to change their minds, to give up on their own projects.

The Lord could have given them a little more consolation, instead he stripped them of everything because he wanted to be their only possession. This is what we often are afraid of, God wants to be our only possession, but we like to ask him for at least a tiny pinch of human security, glory, satisfaction, and instead it seems like he is saying to us: "No, only me! In me everything, without me, nothing". We know that the saints did it, they were great, they were happy, but how many trials, how much suffering they had to go through! God purified them of all the dross of worldliness, stripped them of everything, before he clothed them with his wedding dress.

For reflection:

- How do I feel when things don't go according to my plan?
- How do I behave when I fear that things might end badly?
- What ability do I have to adapt, to change my mind?
- Do I know how to step aside and work with humility by accepting a “supporting” role?

John the Baptist

The courage of truth.

Jesus, speaking of John, says: "Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has none has risen greater than John the Baptist" (Mt 11:11), a solemn affirmation which, as Jesus himself affirms, does not concern his vocation but simply his personality.

Who is this John? What role does he play in the life of Jesus? What made him so “great”?

His vocation comes from his mother's womb, when he recognizes Mary and the child she was carrying, and rejoices. That moment can be considered his baptism. This will be the characteristic that will accompany him to the end: seeking the action of God present in history and helping people to prepare themselves to welcome this action. A question immediately comes to mind: Do you remember what your first experience of Christ was, the first time Christ meant something to you, something different? Has this experience continued to accompany you in life?

His presence as a "prophetic" person, that is, as a witness of God, is immediately noticed by the people, both by the simple people who flock to him, and by the leaders who are worried. There are many questions that arise when we meet a person who is growing rapidly in popularity. “Will he be honest or not?” “What interests are behind

it?” "This kind of people could cause problems, it's better to keep him under control!" For this they ask him: “Who are you? Are you perhaps the Messiah?” (Jn 1:19-28). If he had wanted to take advantage of it and say yes, he would have gained fame, moral power over the crowds, and who knows, maybe even the possibility of a career in politics. History is full of people who started out as prophets fighting the abuses of men of power and then ended up taking power themselves and making the same mistakes. He has clear in his mind what his mission is, and remains faithful to it: “I'm not. I am only the voice of one crying out in the desert”. He recognizes his task of preparing the way for the Lord, he does not hold back. The Gospel calls him "the voice". Voice is that part of us that pronounces the words, which makes them alive and effective. But right at the beginning of the same chapter, the Gospel had clearly stated who the "Word" is: Jesus. John's mission is to make Christ's presence among us effective. “There is one among you whom you do not know”, and he introduces him to us.

But why does he stay in the desert? Just to follow the prophecy of Is 40 "In the desert, prepare the way for the Lord!"? Certainly not!

John knows well that, despite being an expert speaker, the effectiveness of his apostolate is mainly influenced by his lifestyle. People first look at us and listen to us only when and if they consider us credible. It would be natural to think that being credible depends on what we say, but no, in people's mentality credibility comes from the coherence between how we live and what we preach. He preached penance and fasting for a change of life, which is why he started living in the desert, a place where all comforts are lacking,

where he must live by trusting in Providence. Let us remember that John was the son of one of the temple priests, so he had the right to continue in his father's position. What better place to talk about the coming of the Messiah than the Temple of Jerusalem, where thousands of people passed by every day to pray and offer sacrifices. There, with his undeniable oratorical skills, he could have succeeded, becoming the most followed among the teachers of the law. But no! Because there would have been a lack of testimony, moreover, his listeners would have lacked the possibility of transforming the emotional and intellectual experience of listening into a practical experience that would have been imprinted forever in their lives. To get to him, anyone who wanted to listen to him, had to walk for a whole day on the fiery road that crossed the desert of the Dead Sea valley, and then, once he received the message, before returning to the comfort of his house, he had to do the same journey back, facing heat, thirst, hunger, fatigue; enough effort to discourage the curious and superficial, a tool that, instead, strengthens those well-intentioned.

The sentences that we have quoted above are taken from the testimony that John makes of himself when some sent by the Priests of the temple had arrived from Jerusalem, both to make an investigation into his "orthodoxy", and, perhaps, with the secret hope of pulling him on their side. John is focused on his mission across the board and therefore bears a second testimony, this time addressed to his disciples. Seeing Jesus approaching, he says: "Behold the Lamb of God" (Jn 1:29). He is not jealous of his position, of his group of followers, he is not proud, he knows he is at his service and is faithful

to his task. In the mind of the Evangelist who writes, the image of the Lamb immediately recalls three biblical moments: the first is the poem of the servant of YHWH (Is 53:7) "He was treated harshly like a lamb led to the slaughter"; the second is the paschal lamb that Moses had sacrificed and which has since entered the paschal ceremonies; the third is the victorious lamb of which he will speak in the book of Apocalypse. John the Baptist presents us with a Redeeming Messiah, but one who accomplishes his mission through suffering and self-denial. At the same time, he steps aside and invites the disciples to follow Jesus and the true doctrine, even if it is difficult, and he does so by renouncing his prerogatives as teacher: "Here is the one about whom I spoke, after me comes one who he moved forward because he was before me". The episode is repeated two times and finally the second time two disciples, John and Andrew, follow Jesus.

The Messiah we must proclaim to the world, is Jesus the Savior, victorious but at the same time suffering, and we must present him humbly but truthfully. Let us ask ourselves: What image of Christ do I have? What image of Christ do I present through my words and my life? After doing my duty, do I have the humility to step aside?

A similar situation occurs in Jn 3. The disciples tell him that Jesus is "stealing" his job and he not only doesn't worry, but he approves of him saying: "He must increase and I must decrease". He is aware of his function of preparing the way for Jesus and does so with fidelity and humility.

It is a very interesting passage for us today as well. John feels the anomaly of the fact that many of his disciples are still with him, instead of going to Jesus. So first he justifies Jesus: "No one can take

anything unless it is given to him from heaven", then he makes it clear that the bridegroom is Christ, not him, he makes it clear that he is happy with the presence and work of Jesus: “Whoever possesses the bride is the groom; but the friend of the groom, who is present and listens to him, rejoices with joy at the bridegroom's voice”, finally he says clearly: “Now my joy is complete, He must increase, I, on the other hand, decrease”.

Here John calls himself the friend of the bridegroom. He naturally alludes to all of the Old Testament prophecies that presented Israel as the bride of YHWH. This marriage only now finds its fulfilment in Jesus. The friend of the groom, in traditional Jewish marriage celebrations, was the one who, on the wedding day, had the task of going to the bride's house to pick her up and lead her to the groom's house.

His ability to detach himself from what he does and from the people around him is impressive. Let's think about it: have we ever met people who are truthful and detached from their position? What impression did they make on us? How do we manage jealousy in the apostolate? “He got more praise than me, a better position or reward, … etcetera.” Am I jealous or do I rejoice in the good that another gets to do? When I preach, am I talking about Jesus? When I create new friendships, new relationships, am I concerned with bringing people to Christ or do I keep them attached to me?

It is precisely to fully experience this detachment, to bear concrete witness to it, that John lives the austere life of the desert.

What about us? Have we ever met people who truly experience

poverty and simplicity? What impression did they make on us? Are we able to bear witness to God with our lives, with precise and courageous choices, personal choices that go beyond those of the community and the congregation, or do we still rely heavily on words, discussions, arguments and then everything goes up in smoke? All men, in the depths of their hearts, have the desire for just things, honesty, justice, but often we don't take this desire seriously and we say: it's a beautiful thing but it will never come true; there are too many problems; it's impossible; others would not understand it. John, on the other hand, is there to preach and tells us that conversion is possible, it is enough to change our way of thinking and have the courage to begin.

His way of testifying is made up of words and the example of his life. His words are always strong, he is not afraid to rebuke sins, even against important people such as the leaders of the people whom he openly calls "race of vipers". He will reproach Herod that his marriage to Herodias is not valid and this will cost him his life. He seeks the "Truth" at any cost. Out of love for the truth he also recognizes that it is not him that people should go looking for, but the one who will come after him.

We live in a society that is increasingly losing its Christian roots, traditions and customs, and journeys far from the Gospel that had created it. We often hear Christians say: "Who knows what the neighbors think? Who knows what they say about me, if I behave like this? Who knows what they will ask me when I tell them what I believe in?". We call for defense, culture and mutual respect, but we renounce many evangelical values and many things we believe in.

For reflection:

- Do you remember what your first experience of Christ was, the first time Christ meant something to you, something different?
- Has this experience continued to accompany you in life?
- What image of Christ do I have?
- What image of Christ do I present through my words and my life?
- Am I a witness that can be trusted?
- After doing my duty, do I have the humility to step aside?
- What is there that scares me and doesn't leave me free to act in my life?
- Can I compare my ideas and beliefs with those of Christ to see if they are right?
- When there are things to do, do I know how to give my full contribution or am I only concerned with showing the exterior?

Peter

After mistakes, rebuild love and ask for forgiveness.

I cannot deny that, of all the characters in the Bible, Peter is the one I like the most. It is important to speak of him not only because he was the person chosen by Jesus to become the head of the Apostles, the one in charge of the Church, but also because, with his human frailty, with his enthusiasm and his fears, he is very close to each of us.

When Jesus called him, he was about 25 years old. He proved to be a very emotional type of person: he quickly becomes enthusiastic, leaves everything to follow Jesus, asks to walk on water, takes his sword with him to go to the Garden of Gethsemane, says he is willing to die in order to follow Jesus, on Easter morning he runs to the tomb to see if what the women say is true. But he is easily frightened: when he realizes that there is a strong wind, he loses faith and risks sinking; when they ask him if he is a disciple of Jesus, he denies it.

I would like to dwell on three episodes of his life: the walk on the waters, Mt 14,22-30 the denial during the Passion, Mt 26,69-75, the renewal of his desire to be a disciple, Jn 21,15-19.

In the first episode Peter is driving the boat scourged by the waves, Jesus is not present with them, he remained at the top of the hill to pray. Two episodes had just happened: Herod had John the Baptist beheaded and this news had certainly frightened them; Herod

was the king; he could have turned against them too. The second episode, on the other hand, had been the multiplication of the loaves, an exceptional gesture by Jesus, which demonstrated his strength.

The passage begins with a strange verb: Jesus "forced" the apostles to precede him by boat to the other shore. Why this verb which seems to imply that the Apostles do not want to go, as if they were afraid?

In their eyes, the fact that he was sending them out alone, seemed to be a new sending on a mission. It is true that once he had already sent them ahead of him to the villages and it had been a very beautiful experience, but this time the commitment was more risky and demanding. It was not just a question of going to preach the arrival of Jesus, it was rather a question of bringing all those teachings that they had learned in recent episodes: humility, sharing, the opposition of local religious authorities. Furthermore, I wonder: the miracle of the multiplication of bread had just finished and it is clearly stated that 12 full baskets were left over, one for each of them, and we know that this bread is already a prefiguration of the Eucharist and of the commitment to become food for others. Where did these baskets go? Clearly, they were carrying them along, so they were not just going to announce, but to bring themselves as a message of life.

They depart alone, while Jesus goes up the mountain to pray. We know well that most of these apostles were fishermen and therefore navigation experts, many times they must have experienced a stormy sea and high and strong waves. Clearly the fact that the evangelist talks about it is because, at least in his mind, this crossing also represents many crossings that we must make in life. In the bible, the

stormy sea is spoken of several times as a symbol of evil and death, where the violent waves are the evidence of life and the strong wind the opposition of society. The boat, on the other hand, represents the Church whose helmsman is Peter. Therefore, it is permissible for us to make a spiritual reading of this episode. Many times, we embark on intentions or projects, beautiful and charitable projects linked to our works and in any case in favor of the poor. We often leave with enthusiasm, other times with a little fear. Along the way, busy with material and concrete things, we forget about God, we begin to grow with human strength alone, and then everything seems more difficult, hostile. Without him the disciples felt alone and in the dark, disoriented, and we too, on similar occasions, experience God's silence. It seems that he has abandoned us and so we wonder if, faced with all the violence of a world that thinks in the opposite way and seems to be getting stronger, the efforts we make to be faithful to the mandate to build a new world, still make sense. The boat, that is, the community, the Church itself, is tossed about by the waves, put to the test by the worldliness of which Pope Francis speaks. There are also difficulties within the Church, not only outside, such as scandals, certain wrong attitudes of those who have authority in it, etc. Then there is the headwind that prevents them from proceeding, the wind of secularization.

Behold, towards the end of the night, Jesus arrives walking on the waves of the sea. We have said that the sea is the symbol of death, like a monster ready to swallow everyone, but it cannot swallow Jesus because He has conquered death.

Upon seeing him, the disciples are frightened, because they do

not recognize him, they believe they are dealing with a ghost. This is the situation of Christian communities who have forgotten the promise that Jesus had made: “I will be with you until the end of the world”; they have forgotten him because they have not understood that he presents himself in a different way every time, they do not know how to recognize him. This also happens after resurrection; they see Him but do not recognize Him. When one lives in a world of death it is not easy to realize the presence of the risen one. Often for us too, Christ is a ghost, that is, we do not recognize him, and often, when we have to make important choices for life, we do not consider him present.

Someone, represented by Peter, has a little more faith and wonders: will he not be able to communicate that divine life to us too, so that we are not swallowed up by death?

In itself, Peter's question is a bit strange, especially if asked by him who is an expert swimmer. It can be accepted if we agree to act like him and make the choice of life. Peter tries, and as long as he keeps his eyes fixed on the master, he manages to walk in the middle of the waves, but when he begins to doubt, he begins to be afraid of losing his life, he begins to think only of the human side of the choices, then he sinks, and risks losing everything. We are no different from Peter. We believe that our goodwill and generosity can solve the storms we go through. But this only works at the beginning; as we go along, our generosity betrays us, abandons us, and our despair reveals itself. The doubt that assails us is not that Jesus is not the successful man, or that his choice is not good; the doubt is if I am capable of it, if I have the strength to go all the way, if I know how to

live without all the comfort of the world. This is a little faith: the courage to let go of the old life to put on a new one. At first we think we have confidence; but when we get to the point where everything seems to sink, God takes away our illusions. This is when we discover that the events that overwhelmed us were the means to move us to trust in Jesus. These moments of despair are a grace because we cannot find God without crying out to him from the depths of our hearts. Blessed are we if we agree to immerse ourselves in this desperation to cry out to Jesus.

I think the one said in this moment is one of the most beautiful prayers made by St. Peter: "Lord save me", a few words that say it all.

When we then let Jesus enter the boat of our life, then the waves calm down and the journey continues calmly and quickly towards the goal.

The second episode, albeit in a completely different context, follows the same dynamic.

We are at the end of the mission of Jesus. During the last supper He had clearly spoken of his imminent arrest and Peter had immediately come forward with generosity: "Even if I have to die with you, I will never deny you". Then, ready to fight for Jesus, he takes the sword (or perhaps better a knife) with him, and does not hesitate to use it at the moment of arrest by cutting off the ear of the high priest's servant. But Jesus does not seem to approve of his generosity: "Put your sword back into its sheath". Everyone flees, and at first Peter does too, but then he follows Jesus at a distance to see what happens and even manages to enter the courtyard of Caiaphas' palace. From all these attitudes we understand that he is sincerely

attached to Jesus, he is unable to accept that they took him away from him, that he could "end badly". But feelings of love are one thing, feelings dictated by fear are another. When he is asked three questions by the servants, fear takes over and he denies his relationship with Jesus. What happened to the promise he had made a few hours earlier? Human weakness is great. He is in a dangerous area, in the house of the enemy, it doesn't take much for him too to be captured and put to death. It is the collapse of the dream that for three years he had nourished of sharing the fate of the new kingdom with Jesus. It is an extreme but necessary purification of one's intentions and ideals. Only when the whole castle of ideals that we have built for ourselves collapses, are we in the right position to abandon ourselves into God's hands.

To tell the truth there is not much difference between his betrayal and that of Judas; what sets them apart is the way they react. Judas despairs and believes that he no longer has any value and any meaning to live for, so he hangs himself, Peter instead does not look at himself, but at God and his faith leads him to cry. This crying is the second beautiful and deep prayer that gives him the strength to react and move forward.

We have said that Peter proves to be very emotional: enthusiasm makes him promise things that are too great, fear makes him renege on them. These contradictions do not mean that he is a liar, but that feelings are stronger than him, that is, he is not mature. We have proof that he's honest in the fact that every time he's wrong, he acknowledges the mistake and apologizes. It is precisely this ability of his to recognize his own mistakes that slowly matures him and makes

him worthy of becoming the head of the apostles and of the Church.

Mistakes can be of any kind, small or big; we can even betray Jesus, but Jesus never condemns Peter in the Gospel, he always forgives him and renews his trust in him. The important thing is the honesty of intention and action that makes asking for forgiveness possible. Let's ask ourselves: When there are things that don't go right, are we able to acknowledge our mistakes and ask for forgiveness? Have we ever experienced, after apologizing for our mistake, how peace and joy return to our heart? Jesus does not judge Peter but forgives him because he trusts him. Jesus taught us not to judge others, but to love and help them. Do I judge others?

Let us now consider an episode that took place after the resurrection, that is, when Peter is already able to make the leap in quality and is about to be named head of the Apostles and of the nascent Church. We find it in the Gospel of John (21:15-19).

We are located on the shores of Lake Tiberias. There are seven apostles, Jesus has just renewed the miraculous gesture of fishing, the one he had done on the very day he had called Peter to be his disciple. This time too, he leaves the fish behind and throw himself into the sea to reach Jesus as fast as possible. It is the second call of Peter. Now they are sitting around the fire for dinner. When, after the resurrection, the Gospels mention a supper they always refer to as the last supper, so this is a very important moment that begins with the most important prayer there is: the Eucharistic celebration. At this moment Jesus turns to Peter and, as if to create a certain distinction between him and the other Apostles, asks: "Do you love me more than these?" In the Greek language there are 4 words used

to indicate Love: The first "Eros" indicates love dictated by the senses: I see a beautiful girl and I like her. The second word, “Filia”, indicates an interest that satisfies me: I like music, you like driving, he likes that singer, she likes helping the poor. The third, "Storghé", refers to relationships within the family: a mother loves her children, children love their parents. The fourth, "Agape" represents absolute, perfect, selfless love. In the Greek language this last word is almost never used because it represents too lofty a love, while in the Bible it is always a word referring to God.

Jesus, speaking to Peter, uses the fourth word: Peter, do you have Agape for me? Peter replies by saying: you know that I have filìa for you. At this point Jesus says: then take care of others, that is, he becomes a real boss. This is not enough for Jesus so he tries again with the same question: do you have Agape, more than them? and he gets the same answer. Then there is a third time, but since he has not been able to bring Peter to the higher level of love, he lowers himself: Peter, do you have Filia for me more than they? At this point Peter feels bad because he realizes that Jesus had to stoop, and therefore he replies again: Yes, you know.

First thing to underline: God wants perfect love from us. We have to aim high if we want to succeed in life. But at the same time, He knows how to accept our weakness and incapacity. He does not take away his trust in Peter just because he is not yet capable of loving. However, we note that all three times Jesus added: “more than them”. To be worthy of guiding others, one must be able to love more, because true authority is born only from true love.

But there is the second part of the sentence: take care of them.

It doesn't matter how much you are capable of love, but show it by caring for your brothers. Do you really want to become responsible? You have to take care of your brothers.

There is also a fact to underline. Probably in Peter's heart there is still the wound, the sense of guilt for the triple denial, for this reason he is now afraid to express himself generously. The fact that Jesus repeats the question to him three times seems to want to remind him of the three betrayals. Our sins are erased by God's forgiveness, but healing occurs only if we are able to repair, with our love, the damage done.

If the story ended here there would already be a great teaching, but Jesus continues: Now you have become responsible, do you know what it means? You believe that being the boss means that you command and everyone obeys, that everyone has to do what you want; but not! The others will surround you and take you where you don't want to. If your way of commanding is dictated by love then, to help or save them, you will find yourself having to make choices you don't want to.

How do I love others? Am I driven by feelings, by family ties, by interests or do I know how to go beyond? Do I know how to aim for the maximum in my commitment to others without being conditioned by selfishness, but also without getting discouraged if they often come back to the surface? “More than them”. St. Paul says: "Compete in estimating one another." In my friendship with others, am I able to give more than I want to receive? At the end of every decision there is always someone happy because what they wanted was decided and someone unhappy because they chose

differently. Can I be happy that the best has been chosen for the group even if it's not exactly what I thought?

For reflection:

- When things don't go right, are we capable of recognizing our mistakes and asking for forgiveness?
- Have we ever felt, after apologizing for our mistake, how peace and joy return to your heart?
- Do I judge others?
- How do I love others?
- Am I driven by feelings, family ties, interests or do I know how to go beyond?
- Do I know how to aim for the maximum in my commitment towards others, without being influenced by selfishness, but also without becoming discouraged if my weaknesses often come back to the surface?
- In my friendship with others, can I give more than I want to receive?
- In group choices, can I be happy that the best thing was chosen for the group even if it's not exactly what I thought?

John the beloved disciple

The journey to love

John is the youngest of the apostles, perhaps little more than a teenager. Like all young people he is full of enthusiasm, enterprising, and a little impulsive. He has to learn. One day he presents himself to Jesus and says: "We saw someone driving out demons in your name and we prevented him because he was not one of us". Why did this bother him? The phrase "in the name of" indicates the origin of the force or authority with which something is done. The various healers who existed at the time of Jesus, in doing their healings, invoked the name of one of the prophets of the past, or perhaps even of some pagan deity. We see that the fame of Jesus was spreading, so someone had thought of invoking his name. John felt compelled to defend Jesus, with a certain sense of jealousy. We are used to seeing John as the favorite disciple of Jesus, perhaps the most faithful of the twelve, but if we look closely at what Gospel says, we see that he was certainly a person with a somewhat fiery character. If you remember, when the evangelist Mark makes the list of the twelve apostles (3,17), he says that among them were James and John, called sons of thunder, precisely because of their impetuous character. On one occasion, as they pass through Samaria and the inhabitants of a village refuse to welcome them, John asks Jesus: "Do you want us to call down fire from heaven to destroy them?", and on another

occasion their mother goes to Jesus asking that her sons can sit one on his left and one on his right in his kingdom. Well, John probably suffered from a small problem, that of "protagonism", of wanting to be at the center, of feeling master of the situation. In his way of thinking, Jesus is something exclusive to them: we are the only good ones, the only ones capable, woe to anyone who tries to steal this prerogative from us. When one begins to think in this way, his attention is no longer placed on work, on purpose, but on his being at the center and on his success.

This is an attitude that is often encountered in Christian communities. There are people who, taken individually, are very good, committed, with excellent principles, but when they are placed in a role, when they assume a responsibility in the structure of the group or of the parish, they become fanatics, the only custodians of the good: everything must go through them because otherwise nothing goes well.

Each of us has inner motions that push us. Some of them come to us from God and, making us feel his fatherhood, inspire us to mercy, to a sense of goodness, to a desire for salvation, etc. But there are also motions that come from our human nature and which, if left free without any discipline, turn into jealousy, pride, and all those other vices we know.

Often these are the "devils" we need to be freed from, and the Church must set in motion actions to combat the evil that operates through these tendencies. Anyone who works in this sense works for the Kingdom of God. The spirit of protagonism and exclusivism is very harmful to the Church and Jesus fights it with his words. At one point

he explains: "Whoever causes one of these least brothers to stumble..." (Mk 9:42). Scandal is placing an impediment, an obstacle. The younger brothers are certainly not children, the Greek term leaves no doubt, but the most fragile, the weakest, that is, those Christians whose faith is not strong, whose knowledge is not profound, people who are perhaps beginners, who would like to enter the Church but finds an obstacle: the attitude of those who, instead of welcoming and helping them, "scandalize" them. They want to approach the faith but they see that the "faithful" make all sorts of intrigues, there are competitions, a race for the first places; they do not feel the spirit of family and love of which the Gospel speaks, but rivalry and divisions. Then, given the fragility of their faith, they get discouraged and turn away.

To correct his impetuosity, John must exercise humility and he does so by attaching himself to Jesus. This is an attitude that John learns by looking at Jesus. His love for him gradually leads him to conform to the "beloved".

In the fourth gospel, John is always presented as an unnamed disciple. It is better that he remains nameless so that everyone can put his name in that place and thus compare his way of loving Jesus with him. This disciple is always presented in relation to Peter. He had arrived at the Jordan river before Peter and had spent the day with Jesus, but then he had gone to invite Peter so that he too might meet the Master: love feels the need to involve others. Then we find him at the Last Supper when he is close to the Master and Peter tells him to ask Jesus who is the traitor: love that becomes a "bridge" for the relationship of others. We find them together even when they have

the courage to enter the high priest's house, precisely thanks to the knowledge he had, but then when Peter lacks courage and betrays Jesus, he remains: those who love know how to overcome difficulties and remain faithful. Then we find him on Calvary, at the feet of Jesus; Peter is not here and it is up to him to represent the Church: only the disciple who knows how to love Jesus madly reaches the cross. Then there is the Easter morning passage and the race to the tomb. John arrives again before Peter, but does not enter the tomb, he waits for his companion: love respects categories and values the presence of others. Then on Lake Tiberias he is the first to recognize Jesus on the shore, he tells Peter who throws himself into the sea to reach him: love knows how to encourage others to throw themselves into something important. Finally, when the risen one says to Peter "follow me" and he is undecided, he looks at his young friend because he understands that it is on this example of love (that will not die) that he must model his attitude.

Let us try a deeper analysis of the morning episode of Easter day (Jn 20:1-10). Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and found it empty, so she runs to Peter and the "disciple whom Jesus loved". There is no doubt that it is John. We wonder what this disciple sees at the tomb? The same as the Magdalene saw, the empty tomb and the funeral sheet. The verb used is “βλέπει”, material observation.

He does not enter, but waits for Peter to arrive. In the Church everyone travels at different speeds, but then the important steps are taken together. Peter arrives following the “one who loved”. Now he too looks, but here there is a seeing on the second level "θεωρεῖ", that is, contemplating. What he sees begins to bring to his mind many

phrases of Jesus which now begin to make sense; from this verb comes our word “theory”. He began to "recognize", to let himself be invaded by memories, to make room for love. He also sees the shroud which is not just thrown in a corner like the linen cloth, but folded, as if it had the shape of the head of Jesus.

Now John also enters and it is said of him "he saw and began to believe". This verb to see is a third verb “εἶδεν”, a much deeper look that goes beyond what the eyes observe and the mind remembers. This more experiential vision is linked, as a consequence, to "believing".

The path of faith must pass through the path of these three ways of seeing: 1) verifying, 2) reflecting on what has been seen, 3) the last step which is not guided by rationality but by reasonableness and Love. Love is not limited to the rational, it is always one step ahead. Faith cannot be imposed because it can only be pushed by love.

The disciple reads things with the eyes of love. There are different ways of loving depending on our path.

Peter represents the one he loves and is willing to put himself on the line for Jesus, but he is slow because he is still very tied to tradition, to things he doesn't understand.

The "beloved disciple" is the one who has a more passionate, more emotional love, has the courage to jump in first, knows how to move from signs to reality, but he still needs someone like Peter who makes him reason and guides him.

John is, of all the apostles, the one who lived the longest. At the end of his life, almost like a “last Will”, he leaves the admirable letter where he touches the supreme peak of mysticism and theology:

"Dear friends, let us love one another, because love is from God: whoever loves is begotten by God and he knows God. He, who does not love, has not known God because God is love" (1Jn 4:7-8).

For reflection:

- Is our faith based only on what we learned in catechism or on a direct experience of the presence of God?
- What does it mean for us to love others?
- Do we know how to promote others or do we suffer from protagonism?
- Do we know how to be faithful even in moments of difficulty, discouragement, defeat?

Martha and Mary.

(Lk 10:38-42; Jn 11)

The conversion dictated by love

They're sisters of Lazarus and live in his house, so they're probably not married yet. The house must be rich enough; this can be understood both from the position where it is located and from how the environment is described. We also know that Jesus willingly went to them. Perhaps Jesus passed by there when he went to Jerusalem for the Passover, perhaps he stayed there with them, we don't know. From the way they behave, it is clear that there must have been a certain familiarity between them. Perhaps they were disciples of Jesus together with his brother, even if not of those who walked with him. An Eastern tradition says that Mary, the younger of the two sisters, is the sinner who had entered Simon's house to wash Jesus' feet with her tears. Her forgiveness given to her by Jesus makes her life change and from here the friendship of Jesus also with her family is born.

In Luke 10:38 we find that: "A woman named Martha welcomed him into her house". Usually in the Jewish world it was up to the man to invite guests and spend time with them at home, the women were in charge of preparing water for washing, something to eat and drink. Here, however, we see that Martha takes the initiative for everything. It is she who invites, then she goes to the kitchen she begins to

prepare the food and I'm sure she will have prepared the best food, worthy of such a friend. So, she has every right to request that Mary also go with her to the kitchen to work and Lazarus will take care of entertaining Jesus.

Surely, all of us, when we read this passage, feel to be on Martha's side. How many times do we work hard, get busy, and realize that those around us are lazy, don't help, and show no interest? We rightly complain. Sometimes it seems that not even God is interested in us, in what we ask of him and does not lend us a hand by making the work we are doing easier.

Then Martha reproaches Jesus: “Do you not care that my sister left me alone in the kitchen? Tell her to come and give me a hand." Tradition and culture also seem to be on her side. Yet Jesus does not agree with Martha's point of view. Why? They are true friends, but what is their friendship based on? Martha has the habit of doing everything herself, the best, there is no doubt, but she is the one who takes the initiative, who does and undoes. Others are left there as spectators and eventually as users of her work. It would almost seem that she wants to buy friendship through what she does. Maybe she didn't even ask Jesus what she would like to eat.

Mary, on the other hand, has a different attitude. She is in love with Jesus so for her the most important thing is to be with him, to listen to him. She does not claim any right to Jesus' friendship, she is happy to have it and to be there with him.

What creates true friendship is the capacity for dialogue. In a dialogue the most important thing is listening. The moment you speak, you invade the space of the other, which is also a necessary

thing, but the moment you listen, you make room in your heart for the other, you give them a privileged place, you give them power over you. That's why Jesus tells Martha that Mary has chosen the best part of her that she will not be taken from her.

In an environment with a very close and conservative way of thinking, Jesus uses Mary to talk about love and friendship. This certainly creates a scandal, but Jesus has accustomed us to breaking the parameters of the culture of his time.

How is our friendship with Jesus? There is no doubt that we work well, there is no doubt that we pray and when we pray, we say many prayers, many words; but are we capable of listening to Jesus? Are we sure that all the good we are doing is really what God wants us to do?

Every Sunday we go to Mass, listen to the Gospel and a good sermon, then we go home and continue doing what we have always done, as if the Word of God we have heard has not produced any change in us, it has been useless; as if the important thing about our being Christians is what we do. Are we sure this is the right attitude? This passage would seem to tell us the opposite. Here there is no opposition between prayer and apostolate, but between being with Jesus and being without him.

Once St. Peter said to Jesus: “Teacher to whom shall we go? You alone have the words of eternal life". We will go to heaven only if we learn to listen to God rather than do and do. We must learn not to "work for God" but to do the "work that God wants". God speaks to us all the time, in all the things that happen around us. If we learn to discover his presence, to recognize his will in the various moments of

our lives, then we will realize with great surprise how different his will is compared to what we had in our minds.

Sometime later the fact of Lazarus' illness and death takes place. The two sisters send word to Jesus that Lazarus is sick, a polite plea for help that Jesus seems to ignore. Jesus' attitude certainly hurt them, so Martha has the courage to say: "If you had been here my brother would not have died". But we see that the friendship is so deep that disappointment and anguish do not diminish the faith she has in him: "But I know that even now whatever you ask, the Father will grant you". Martha is an example of the accomplished Christian faith, completely turned to Christ, son of God and savior of the world. With Mary the conversation is shorter and ends with Jesus' tears. Martha reveals to us the divine aspect of Christ, Mary the human one. Now the two sisters disappear to make room for Jesus who performs the miracle.

Another episode takes place a few days later, when a banquet is set up in their house, probably to thank Jesus for the miracle. Here Mary once again proves to be the loving and attentive disciple, so much so as to anticipate the whole destiny of Jesus. In fact, she anticipates the washing of the feet, and anoints them with myrrh, anticipating their death and burial. Once again the woman's attitude is shocking. The similarity of this passage with that of the sinner in Matthew 26.6 and the coincidence of times and places (Bethany before Easter), gave rise, in the Eastern world, to the idea I mentioned of considering Mary as the person forgiven by Jesus on that occasion. To the Jewish mentality it was reprehensible for a woman to wash a man's feet at a public banquet, furthermore she

dries them with her hair; only street women showed up with their hair down, and finally she uses a very expensive perfume, the equivalent of 10 months of a worker's salary, money which, as Judas says, even if the family was rich, could be used for the poor. Mary breaks all the barriers that subject women to men to give space to the feeling of love for Jesus.

For reflection:

- How much space do we give in our lives to listening to the Word of God?
- Is our way of living and acting influenced by the Gospel we hear and by the reflection we do on it?
- How is our friendship with Jesus?
- There is no doubt that we work well, there is no doubt that we pray and when we pray, we say many prayers, many words; but are we capable of listening to Jesus?
- Are we sure that all the good we are doing is really what God wants us to do?

The Magdalene. (Jn 20)

Let love be your engine

The Gospel presents Mary Magdalene as a companion and guide in discovering the risen Christ. Mary is a woman whose life was radically changed by her encounter with Jesus and by having felt, perhaps for the first time in her life, loved and respected. Since then she has joined the disciples of Jesus together with the Madonna and other women, and with them she went down to Jerusalem for Easter. On the occasion of Jesus' arrest, while all the apostles have fled, she is one of the women who follows him to the foot of the cross.

She represents those who have truly fallen in love with Jesus, who do not resign themselves to death, who cannot do without him. If we do not have this feeling of "not being able to do without", it means that there are other things that distract us, occupy our heart and love is not strong. In the face of Jesus' death, what does he do? Escape? Back home? No! She goes to the tomb as soon as possible! So, on Easter morning we find her there. When the Magdalene goes to the tomb it is still dark, despite the fact that it is already dawn. It is the darkness of human uncertainty and sadness. Her fervent love for the Lord drove her there, and so when she sees the rolled stone, she is immediately concerned that it has been taken away. Love doesn't immediately bring light, it needs faith, but it is the most important energy that anyone who walks on the path of faith needs. The light

will be given to him when she finds herself in front of the empty tomb, where the one she cannot do without is missing. It is still her love that makes her run to the house of Peter and her other disciple to seek help. Faith is given to each one but then it moves within the community.

As a woman she is capable of loving in a different way, more human perhaps, but more profound. Even when Peter and John leave the tomb to go home, she stops there and is the first to have a vision of the Risen One. She sees Jesus, but she doesn't recognize him because the sadness for his death is too strong. As long as the relationship remains only formal (woman you are looking for?) Her heart is somewhere else. Only when she hears herself called by name does she recognize it, like the sheep that hear and recognize the shepherd's voice (10:4). She would like to embrace him and never leave him but the Lord prevents her and sends her to her brothers.

Mary is therefore described as a disciple and sent by the Lord to bring the greatest news ever heard: the resurrection. She was not among the twelve who shared the last supper, she will not be among those she will send after the ascension, she will not be among the leaders of the Church, however Jesus sends her, because what she must bring is a message of love and only one person who knows how to love can carry it. Thus, she is now the true apostle, she who is a woman. Naturally all this is against the Jewish custom. Who in Israel would ever believe a woman's testimony? The apostles must make an act of humility, they won't do it; Peter, who had testified on various occasions that he loved Jesus, and John, the beloved disciple, run to the tomb but see only the empty tomb, the other apostles not

even that, they must trust the words of the women, but they do not trust and will remain closed in the Cenacle full of fear, until the evening, until Jesus will also present himself to them. She, instead, runs to announce to the others: "I have seen the Lord". This "seen" is not rationality, it is beyond, it's what love makes her understand. She has not seen "Jesus", she has seen the Risen Lord.

Even in our life, now, Christ's tomb is empty. Inside him there was not only his body pierced by nails and a spear, there was also a large part of our life. There were our fears, our feelings of inadequacy, of guilt, our selfishness, our unbridled search for comfort, security, satisfaction, our coldness and inability to love, all things that prevent us from living fully. life, which empties our hearts. We often appear to be alive, but in reality, we are dead. Christ took all our weaknesses with him to the tomb and now wants us to rise again with him because he also rose for us. He stands by our side and says to us: "Fools, don't you still understand? is your heart closed? Are your eyes blind?"

Maybe we live our religion, our relationship with God, too formally, too superficially. We were always taught that the important thing was to avoid sins, to follow the commandments, to say prayers; that was fine! Now this is no longer enough. Jesus wants our heart, not our prayers, he wants our life, not our observance. He took all our weaknesses to his grave and now he says to us: "Get up! rise again, change your life, I give you the strength to do it". You will tell me: "But we have tried many times and we have not succeeded!" Have we, maybe tried in a wrong way? Maybe we thought we could buy God with our practices and we forgot that He had already paid for

everything.

Magdalene recognizes him when she stops thinking about her pain and hears her name called. The two from Emmaus recognized him when they invited him to share dinner with him. It's not the eyes or the brain that recognizes the Risen One, it's the heart.

We studied it a lot, but did we love it? We give him time to go to church, but do we also give him time to be alone with him, to read his word? Do we follow the Ten Commandments and the 5 Precepts, but do we also allow ourselves to be challenged by the Gospel? Do we reflect? Are we trying to put it into practice? We are baptized so we are Christians, but is that the only thing that makes us Christians? Do we strive to live for Christ, with Christ, like Christ?

The resurrection of Christ invites us to a new life. If today we do not feel the desire to convert, to live our relationship with Christ in a different way, then tomorrow will be a day like any other, in a week we will have forgotten that there was Easter and Christ suffered and died for us, but not at all. If we have the courage to try, at least a little, to put into practice in daily life what we hear in the Gospel on Sunday, we will discover a completely different world, a completely different joy, because we will have opened the door to Christ and He will come to dine with us and to reveal his love to us.

Let us allow ourselves to be provoked by Christ and by his love for him.

For reflection:

- Do I really love Jesus? How do I know that what I feel is true love?

- Have I ever felt the desire to do something more, perhaps something a bit crazy, to be faithful to the Gospel.
- How much time do I spend talking with Jesus?
- When I am with our friends, do I talk about Jesus and my love for him?

Philip

Curiosity and resourcefulness

Of Philip, as with many others of the twelve Apostles, little is known in the Gospels.

He comes from Bethsaida, also the birthplace of Peter and Andrew. His Greek name makes us think that perhaps he is the philosopher of the group, in fact we meet him 3 times in the Gospels and his interventions always indicate a desire to know more.

The scene of his calling has some interesting aspects. First, we have two disciples of John the Baptist who leave their master to follow Jesus. At first, they are not named, but then we learn that one is Andrew. Many scholars suggest that the other could be Philip, his fellow countryman. A double scene opens where each of the two make a change from being a disciple to become a witness and a messenger. The first, and here the name of Andrew is mentioned, convinces his brother Simon (Peter) to follow him to meet Jesus. The next day, Jesus meets Philip (here he is mentioned), he invites him to follow him and he goes in search of Nathanael to lead him to Jesus. It seems that, from the very beginning, whoever receives the call feels invested in the task of communicating the discovery made. This is not a formal assignment, but the overflowing enthusiasm of communicating what has been found. The words used by Philip on this occasion are a real profession of faith: "We have found Him of

whom it is written in the law of Moses and in the prophets: Jesus, son of Joseph, from Nazareth" (Jn 1, 45). The central verb is : "we found" which is also repeated for Andrew. It is like a refrain that does not indicate a simple casual discovery but a true profession of faith, the result of a strong experience. They had spent an afternoon with him, the Gospel even stops to underline the time of the meeting, so it was something that was imprinted in their minds and in their hearts. Here's precisely the desire to communicate it to those who are related to them. Furthermore, there is the fact that, despite the fact that each time one speaks, though in the absence of the other, they do not say "I have found", but "we have", a discovery made together and matured together. The friendship that united them becomes an instrument of growth in faith, because the experience they had that afternoon was above all a way of living together. We are at the dawn of the family that will form around Jesus, the family of the thirteen. Among the three sons of Bethsaida, Philip's confession of faith is the most complete because it gives the identity card of the Messiah, reporting all the characteristic elements: name (Jesus), paternity (Joseph), place (Nazareth). If the first part gives us the social identity card, the second gives us the existential identity card of the Messiah: "He about whom Moses and the prophets wrote". Therefore, Philip's confession of faith is not based on a hallucination or a youthful infatuation, but is based on a continuity between the faith of his Ancestors and his experience as a believer in daily life.

This allows us to open a discourse on faith. If, on the one hand, it is the fruit of a free gift from God, in Philip's case, we could say that it stems from his being with Jesus and above all in the invitation

"follow me" that He gives him, on the other hand, it needs fertile ground in which this seed is to be planted, and the time and care required for it to grow and bear fruit. The terrain is given by the entire religious tradition of his people, by their attachment to "Moses and the prophets", as Philip himself says. He is like a good boy who went to catechism and was an altar boy. But there was something more that prompted him to leave Bethsaida and go to the Jordan river to listen to John the Baptist, therefore a serious desire for something deeper and at the same time more personal. It is precisely the preaching of the Baptist that prepares this soil, already fertile in itself, to receive the seed in the best possible way. This discourse reminds us of the importance of education given to children, by parents, and by catechism.

The seed is not yet the tree and it is not yet the fruit. The path of growth is not always easy and collides with the difficulties of life. For Philip, the experience of growing up in the shadow of Jesus covers all three years of walking with him and perhaps, that is still not enough. We have hints of the development of Philip's faith in the other two episodes in which he is mentioned. Here we see more clearly his character as a researcher eager to understand something that escapes him at first glance.

We have the first episode on the occasion of the multiplication of the loaves (Jn 6:1-13). It is again Jesus who provokes him. Faced with the hungry multitude, as if to bring him down to earth, to a reality dictated by practical necessity, Jesus asks him: "Where can we buy bread so that they may have something to eat?" Clearly Jesus is not asking for help or a solution, but he calls the attention of the apostles

to give them a profound lesson. The question in itself is senseless, given that the crowd is large and there are no nearby villages, but it serves to pose the dilemma to Philip's awake mind: The need is concrete, but there are no concrete tools to satisfy it. Philip, taken aback, replies in a slightly embarrassed way: "Two hundred denarii of bread are not even enough for everyone to receive a piece". It almost seems like giving up in the face of evidence. His friend Andrew tries to relieve him of embarrassment with an apparently equally senseless intervention: "Here is a boy who has five barley loaves and two fish". Where reason does not arrive, faith must take over and this is the first great test for them. “Let them sit down”. Jesus' request exposes them either to an exceptional miracle or to an equally exceptional fool. They have to tell people to sit down because they will soon give them something: what? We all know the story. What is Jesus teaching them about faith?

a) that God knows how to solve all problems;

b) that to do so, however, he needs our faith;

c) that this faith passes through the ability to be translated into concrete gestures of sharing. The multiplication occurs because the boy offered them what little bread he had and they offer it to Jesus.

We have a second episode where Philip appears immediately after Jesus solemn entry into Jerusalem. (Jn 12,21-23) Some Greeks had also come for the Easter feast. They must have probably heard of this strange teacher from Nazareth who preaches well and works miracles and they are curious to meet him. They approach Philip, perhaps because they have realized that he speaks their language or in any case he has a name deriving from their culture. This time, however,

he does not take them directly to Jesus, he first goes to consult with Andrew, and then together they go to Jesus. The journey of growth in faith that they had begun together on the banks of the Jordan and strengthened on the occasion of the multiplication of the loaves, continues in mutual aid to discernment. Perhaps the enthusiasm of the beginnings has disappeared, but the faith is consolidating. It is true that shortly before the crowd had cheered them, but it is also true that during their journey, Jesus had prophesied three times that in Jerusalem they would have captured and killed him. Was mixing with foreigners dangerous? Not in itself, because in this case they were certainly proselytes, that is, people who had converted to Judaism or perhaps were of Jewish origins even if born in Greece, like Saul, for example. However, the fact shows that they are a bit tense. For Jesus these Greeks represent the fact that the time has come to fulfill the mission given to him by the Father, to celebrate the transition from the religion of the small state of Israel, based on the observance of the laws, to the universal religion based on the commandment of love. Jesus' answer explains it well: "The hour has come for the Son of man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you: if the grain of wheat that falls to the ground does not die, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much fruit". On the occasion of the multiplication, he had asked them to renounce the rational aspect of their faith, here he seems to say that they must renounce life itself. What did they come here for? Did they find what they were looking for on the banks of the river Jordan?

The answer seems to come a few days later during the last supper (Jn 14:8-9). Jesus is speaking to the eleven (Judas has already left) and

is telling them that he is "the Way, the Truth and the Life". So, they had to look for the answer to all their searches in Jesus himself. It is not a speech so easy to understand and accept, for those who are used to thinking with their head. For three years they had walked with him (Way), heard his word (Truth), and shared all the moments and experiences (Life), but where was he taking them now? They have a strong desire to know God. Jesus talked about him abundantly, he said he knew him well, but they, in fact, hadn't met him yet. Here, then, is Philip, the philosopher who intervenes: "Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us." Once again Philip is not alone but he seems to support Thomas' previous request: "We don't know where you are going, how can we know the way?". This is the aspiration of every religious person, but it lacks rationality. The faith of the disciples is slow. The search and the waiting cannot go on forever: "Show us the Father, and it is enough for us". What was clear to Jesus was not clear to all of his disciples, especially not to Philip. Jesus tries to clarify: "He, who has seen me, has seen the Father [...] Don't you believe that I am in the Father and that the Father is in me?" Believing is a matter of faith, knowledge and total surrender to God. We must take the step of going beyond the physical image of the teacher, the life partner, the founder of the community, to recognize the eternal Word of God. It is difficult to let go of all the human aspects that make us feel alive and abandon ourselves to a reasoning that is not clear. The step that Jesus asks for is the final leap of faith, the leap in the dark which has two moments, the theoretical one, here, and the practical one in the Garden of Olives. Their faith is not ready yet and they flee; it must be purified by human defeat, the loss of the loved

one, the loss of their ideals, the uncertainty about the future. There, faith receives the final purification and will become mature allowing them to remain united in expectation of something they do not know yet and which will only be revealed on Easter evening.

For reflection:

- Do I have a sincere desire to know God, or am I attracted by many other things?
- Am I able to remain faithful to the Lord even in moments of doubt and to present them to Him in prayer?
- Do I make myself a spokesperson for my faith with the people around me, so as to attract them to Jesus?
- Would I be willing to take the leap in the dark that the apostles had to take on Good Friday?

Nathanael (Bartolomew)

Jn 1:43-51

The man in whom there no deceit

Apart from when the list of the twelve apostles is made, Bartholomew is mentioned only once in the Gospel and moreover with the name of Nathanael, that is, at the moment of his call. The name "Nathanael" means God gave, while the name "Bartolomew" means son of Tolmay, so perhaps it is not a real name but a way of calling him referring to his father.

Chapter 1 of the Gospel of John serves the Evangelist to present the identity of Jesus, and he does this by arranging various episodes throughout the week and introducing various characters who bear witness to the messiahship of Jesus. This week is commonly called "the inaugural week", and wants to recall the week of the creation of the world of the book of Genesis. Chapter 2 then begins with the episodes of the wedding at Cana and the "purification of the Temple" in Jerusalem, where Jesus officially begins his messianic work. Nathanael is the last character we meet during this "inaugural week". He is not called directly by Jesus, but receives the announcement from Philip who had already entered the circle of disciples. Philip had passed on his experience to him: "We have found the one about whom Moses in the law and the prophets wrote, Jesus, son of Joseph of Nazareth".

This announcement is like an identity card of Jesus, emphasizing his human aspect, "son of Joseph, of Nazareth", and messianic, due to his relationship with Moses said (see Deuteronomy 18:15-18) and with Elijah according to the text of Malachi (3,23). The human aspect is easier to recognize and it is certainly not a good calling card given that Nazareth was a small village in the Galilee countryside, known for the legalist and intransigent character of its inhabitants, just think of how they treated Jesus himself the first time he returned. Hence Nathanael's prejudice; it seems incredible to him that such a place, never mentioned in the Old Testament, could have given birth to the Messiah, the liberator of Israel that everyone awaits, so he expresses himself contemptuously: "Can anything good come from Nazareth?".

However, he is open to encounters because he is truly in search of the "Savior of Israel", and this honesty makes him a "true Israelite in whom there is no falsehood", as anyone who comes to believe in Jesus should be. Nathanael, feeling completely understood, in a profound act of faith, recognizes Jesus as "Son of God, King of Israel". These are messianic titles, which will then be taken up again in the passion (Jn 19,37: «I am king») and in the resurrection (Jn 20,28: «My Lord and my God!»).

Throughout his life Jesus collides with Jews who claim to be "righteous" only because they practice the laws to the letter. We are well aware of Jesus' many disputes with the Pharisees, the Scribes and the doctors of the law. They presented themselves to people as models to follow, but they did so with pride, placing themselves above others, judging others for their inability to be perfect.

In those times, however, there was a category of people in Israel,

called the Anawim, that is, the poor of Yahwé, who in their simplicity felt the anguish of the present evil and fasted and prayed to implore Yahwé to send the promised Messiah soon. I don't know if Bartholomew was part of this group, but the fact that Philip invited him saying that he had "found the Messiah of whom the prophets spoke" indicates that this search was certainly important for Nathanael.

Nathanael experienced that Jesus had an uncommon knowledge of things, he felt intimately understood, observed and chosen even before meeting him.

Openness to Christ opens up a radiant future for Nathanael: "You will see greater things than these," a promise, strengthened and extended to others as well: "you will see heaven open and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of man." This promise presents Jesus as a point of contact between heaven and earth, a place of God's radiant and luminous presence, full fulfillment of the desires of every true Israelite, Nathanael as well as every other believer.

We wonder what the reference to that fig tree under which Nathanael was standing means. Many interpretations have been given of this detail. Perhaps it refers to the fact that usually in small villages, the Rabbis gathered their classes outdoors, sitting in the shade of some tree. This would indicate that Jesus appreciated Nathanael's attitude of listening and desire to learn.

He was originally from Cana in Galilee: this detail allows us to hypothesize that he personally witnessed Jesus' first miracle, the transformation of water into wine which took place, as is known, in

Cana, during a wedding banquet just three days after meeting Jesus.

Everything else is from the tradition: some sources speak of his preaching in India and then in Armenia, where he would also have converted the king, however attracting the ire of the pagan priests active in the area. For this reason, according to tradition, he would have suffered an atrocious martyrdom, condemned to be skinned alive and then beheaded. This legend is also mentioned in the Last Judgment of the Sistine Chapel where the saint shows the skin of which the torturers "undressed" him, and in his facial features, deformed by suffering, Michelangelo wanted to give us his own self-portrait.

For reflection:

- Our vocation dates back to much earlier than when we discovered it, because God has "always" known and chosen us. Are we aware of this fact?
- God trusts us and values us much more than we value ourselves.
- It is normal to have prejudices about people and places, the fruit of our culture, but our desire to seek the truth must always be stronger. What are our biases? Are we willing to drop them to welcome the truth, no matter where it comes from?

Thomas

Wanting to see and understand everything: gift and shortcoming

Thomas has become famous for his disbelief and has become a bit of a symbol of those who want to be sure before entering into a relationship.

The most famous episode in which we find him mentioned takes place on the evening of Easter Sunday. Jesus appears to the apostles gathered in the Upper Room, but Thomas is not there. Eight days later he is there too and here we have a very nice little scene.

Each character has his own way of placing himself in front of Jesus. Thomas represents those who find it difficult to blindly accept the message, those who want rational proofs. All the gospels say that, after the resurrection, Jesus underlines the doubts that the apostles still have; therefore, Thomas is not alone, everyone had their doubts. Thomas becomes the symbol of this difficulty that we too often have in accepting the idea of the risen Lord when, perhaps implicitly, we think: Is it possible to welcome him today? Is he still alive?

In introducing Thomas, the evangelist always calls him "Didymus", which means "the twin". Whose? We are his twins, not just because we look like him. Thomas is not like someone who distances himself from the Church by contempt for others and believes himself superior, nor like someone who says he is

scandalized by what happens in the Church. He does not abandon the Church, he maintains ties with it, and at the right moment we find him in it. He represents those who leave for a moment due to difficulties, but still cheers the idea of a new world. There are people who have dedicated years of their life, have spent hours and hours of work and apostolate, but then in a moment of discouragement or disappointment, they have left. Some people, faced with certain manifestations of power and wealth from those who, on the other hand, should show them love and service, find themselves out of place and go out; they do not despise, but with sadness feel out of place and can't wait to return to the community, because they know that there is Someone there who holds the community together with a project of his own.

The other apostles had already seen Jesus on Easter evening and they "said to him": "We have seen". The verb “they said” is in the imperfect, a continuous, insistent action. They bring their experience but there is no evidence, only personal experience. Proof that this change is the fruit of a direct encounter with Christ and not the fruit of intellectual speculation is the fact that Thomas, who was absent, is unable to accept the change of his brothers, he too needs to have direct experience of the risen Christ and of the wounded Christ. He then will be able to exclaim “my Lord and my God”.

What is Thomas' personal Easter experience like?

“Eight days later”. It skips from Sunday to Sunday; Jesus stands among them on the day of the Lord. Here we want to highlight the importance of the community celebration which, already at the time when the Gospel was written, took place during the "Day of the Lord".

Even the greeting that Jesus makes: "Peace be with you" is what those who presided over the Sunday liturgy offered to the first Christians. The risen one always gives peace, never reproach.

Thomas had asked to see and touch the wounds because he needs to heal his sense of guilt, of unworthiness and Jesus shows the wounds, "Put your finger here, put your hand on my side"; he shows them lovingly as if to say to him: I don't care what it was, it's part of your human nature, it's a part of that Thomas that I have chosen, loved, called. I still love this same Thomas and I still trust him, so, roll up your sleeves and go with all the others to the mission I have prepared for you.

Imagine Thomas' embarrassment at that moment, joy mixed with guilt, shame, curiosity. That of Jesus is not a reproach, but a request to fulfill what was his desire: to touch the wounds. Jesus seems to say to him: "Keep your gaze always fixed on these hands and on this side". If we always keep in mind what those hands did, then our way of being and acting changes. How do I do it? In the Eucharist. Jesus presents himself as the bread of life, the food of life, and on "the Day of the Lord" we must do what Thomas did, get in touch with Jesus, and experience his presence.

Thomas's profession of faith is the most beautiful we find in the Bible, placed right on the lips of the one who had found it hard to believe: "My Lord and my God". The Gospel was written at the end of the first century, at the time of the emperor Domitian who presented himself as Lord and God in the Empire, and began all his decrees by saying: "I, your Lord and God, decree that…". Thomas, on the other hand, says to Jesus: "You are my Lord and my God". From that

moment he will have no more doubts and will become an apostle of the Gentiles. One tradition has it that he went to Persia to preach, another has it that he went to southern India and there are Churches that have been referring to him as founder since the second century.

Jesus does not expect that we do not sin, that we are not afraid, he only asks that we accept his love, that we trust in his strength, that we put him at the center of our choices instead of our emotions or desires.

He loves us and chooses us despite our weaknesses and our sins, indeed he chooses us precisely because of our weakness, as he will say to Saint Paul: "because in your weakness I can show my strength".

Going to bear witness to Christ, especially in a world like today's, so distant from the values of the Gospel and so subtle, must not be an act of heroism on our part, but the result of our experience of feeling loved by Christ. I am reminded of the prophet Jeremiah who, in a moment of discouragement caused by persecution says: "I will no longer follow my Lord, I will no longer preach him", but then immediately adds: "But there was like a fire inside me that burned, a fire I could not resist" and returns to preaching and accepts that the persecutions continue and worsen.

The Lord needs each of us, but first of all he needs us to stop looking at ourselves to see if we are capable of it, if we feel like it, if the mission is within our reach or is it difficult, what should we say or do, what will be the result. He only needs us to feel loved by him and to bear witness to this love.

For reflection:

- St. Thomas was doubtful by character. What are the doubts in my life?
- Being in front of Jesus and his wounds, makes him feel embarrassed and makes him suffer. Do you recognize that the love of Jesus could be the right answer to your doubts?
- Every day, in the Eucharist, we touch the "wounded" body of Christ. Are we able to see in Him "My Lord and My God"?
- His conversion is complete and his commitment as well. Are we capable of delivering ourselves, our will, our projects, our commitment into the hands of the Lord?

The rich young man

(Mk. 10:17-22)

The necessity of making costly choices

The meeting between Jesus and the rich young man presents various reading possibilities. This passage is usually used during vocational meetings, but I want to analyze it from another point of view: that of the encounter.

We are on the road. In Mark's Gospel, all of Jesus' important teachings are done on a journey, the journey of life, the journey to God. A person comes to meet him. It doesn't say who he is. Matthew speaks of a young man; Mark does not say it. He represents all who honestly seek the perfection of life. He sees in Jesus an interesting and valid person and therefore goes to him for advice. He is a good person who has put the commandments into practice since his childhood; now he wants to improve. “What do I do to inherit eternal life?” If he were here among us, we would say that he is the best and perhaps we would even elect him to be "in charge" of some group.

He rushes in and drops to his knees. It is the attitude of those who go to Jesus to ask for a grace, a miracle. He has everything but he is restless; none of the earthly joys can satisfy us. St Augustine said: "Our soul does not find peace until it rests in you". Restlessness is always within us and we try to silence it with music, noise, etc.; he, instead, believes that the solution to his lack of joy, of life, is in God

and he wants to earn it, but with his strength; he wants to be sure, he wants orders to obey, things to do, he wants to earn this eternal life, but the more he tries, the more restless he feels.

Here is his mistake; there is nothing to gain, because everything is given to us by God and free of charge. The indications that God gives us are not meant to please Him, but to do what is best for us. We find our reward in what we live with, we have no right to claim rewards. Everything else is a free gift. We are convinced that whoever sins, is a lucky person, while whoever follows Christ, suffers for a future good. The Gospel says: blessed are you now: whoever suffers is already blessed now, whoever is poor is already blessed now, whoever does good is already blessed now. It is a difficult speech to understand.

So: what must I do to be worthy of inheriting this gift? Jesus provokes him on his ground: Do you know the law? He mentions 6 commandments. It's the only time Jesus mentions the commandments, but we got stuck there. Jesus does not give them much importance, indeed he eliminates the first three, which were characteristic of Israel, while the others were common to all religions. Jesus therefore cites common moral standards. Do you think you deserve heaven just because you follow all the rules?

Then the Gospel continues with an important detail. “Then Jesus, looking at him (having looked inside him) loved him”. He saw a heart capable of making a leap in quality. He loved that predisposition. He offers him the possibility of the jump, but "He, shocked by those words, went away sad". Jesus' proposal is difficult, different from the usual ones. He is forced to make a decision. He gets scared and says

no.

What did Jesus propose? He simply said: "Hand over all you have to the poor". Jesus' request regarding goods is: "distribute them to those in need". Psalm 24 says: "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it". There are no possessive pronouns: "mine, yours", everything belongs to God. We are administrators and he teaches us how to administer them. We must give them to the poor because the world God wants is one in which there are no poor. "Blessed are the poor in the Spirit", those who, moved by the Spirit, have handed everything over to God and have therefore remained poor.

Why does he say no? Because the things he possesses are stronger than his desire to do well and therefore do not let him free. He can't separate himself from them.

When Jesus tells him to hand over the things he owns, he doesn't mean just money, but much more: The security that our home gives us; our position and prestige; the image that others have of me; my culture; my way of thinking and my ideas; my time. What did you do with your money, time, looks, voice, talents, etc.? What did you do with it? The treasure you will take with you to eternal life is formed by the things you handed over to God. Everything else is confiscated at customs. So, it's not a matter of throwing everything away (all are gifts from God), but of handing it over to the needy, because that is why God has given them to us.

Every time we have a discussion with someone, all things are put to the test, because the other has different ideas, different interests, different cultures, different needs, different hobbies. If everyone stays fixed in their positions, the situation remain blocked. In

discussions, more often than not, it's not a question of who is right or who is wrong, because often both positions are right. The same happens when a decision has to be made: the conflicting interests are many and varied.

Jesus presents the young man with a difficult choice: Either you trust your things, or you put them aside and trust me. This isn't easy.

In a group, the manager's job is to know how to mediate everyone's needs, to listen to everyone's proposals with an open mind, not to let oneself be influenced by one's desires, but to put one's ideas on the plate, like everyone else, and then evaluate everything objectively.

The question to ask is never: "What is best for me", but: "What is best for the people in front of me, what is best for the group". If you prefer, we can rephrase this in a different way: "What is the will of God?".

Who is the evangelical counsel of poverty for? It has nothing to do with being religious or consecrated, first or second category Christians; it is for everyone, it is for those who want to be followers of Christ. Every Christian is required to administer the goods of this world according to God's command.

What did this man do then? He returned home, continued to follow the commandments, remained an honest person, but did not become a Christian. He has not overcome the restlessness that he had inside.

For reflection:

- The young man was committed and good and well-

intentioned, but in the face of Jesus' requests he goes away sad and gives up. Have you ever had to give up on your plans and walk away sad?

- The young man showed little ability to listen to Jesus, because in front of his proposal he immediately posed his ideas. When we listen to another (or converse), do we take care to listen deeply to the person to try to understand him well, and understand his motivations? Or, on the contrary, even before the other finishes, do we already have an answer prepared according to our schemes?
- The rich young man remained bound by his possessions. When you speak, what influences you the most? Time, fear, image, friendships, fear of having to change ideas, fear of showing that I too can be wrong?
- The young person has to make a choice and he proves he doesn't know how to make it. Do we know how to make choices with courage even if sometimes they cost?

The Shepherds

When the rejected become the first

In the Gospel we read that some angels appeared to the shepherds to announce the "great joy" of the birth of Jesus. This fact is much more important and significant than we might think.

The appearance of angels in the Gospel is always connected with the history of salvation. Who are those who see angels? Zechariah, Mary, the women at the tomb. In the OT they had been seen by Abraham, Samuel's mother, Daniel and his three companions in the furnace, Tobias.

The word "angel" means bearer of message. Whoever receives their visit is the recipient of a special message from God. We do not find any apparitions to important people such as the Pharisees, the Scribes, the political leaders. It is not just a matter of faith because there is no doubt about the faith of the Pharisees. The only exception is Zacharias, but his announcement is in view of the birth of John the Baptist who, as soon as he becomes an adult, renounces his position of authority and power and retires into the desert. The apparitions are always for the simple and are connected with God's plan.

Who were the shepherds? They were the most despised part of society. They had to take the sheep and goats to graze in semi-desert areas; this meant traveling in search of grass and, consequently being away from home for months. They lived in the open countryside, so

they were used to hard life, especially at night, when there was a danger that wolves or thieves would attack the flock. This usually involved having a rather rough character, difficulties in stable relationships, the impossibility of respecting religious times such as prayer in the synagogue on Saturdays, respecting Saturday as a day of non-activity; furthermore, they did not have access to the school, which was usually linked to the synagogue, etc. Hence, their knowledge of religion was very limited. They were considered outcasts, people to be avoided, ignorant, people not to be trusted.

To these people the angels bring the announcement of the greatest joy and news in history.

In the OT we find many prophecies concerning the coming of the Messiah. They are official announcements, written in sacred books, addressed to those who know how to read and understand, doctors, scribes, etc. Here, however, we have the announcement to the rejected, the ignorant, the rude.

Sometimes we have had doubts about our vocation only because our family is poor, I am less capable than others, I have studied less, I have fewer things, etc. God usually prefers the poor and weak.

What is the attitude of the shepherds?

"They kept watch". If they sleep, the wolves or thieves steal the sheep. In life we need to be vigilant, too many thieves are ready to steal our faith, simplicity, innocence, and trust in God. Shepherds are people who have a night life, not like those who go to discos, pubs, to have fun, but like those who work, the night guards, those who keep watch in hospitals. We use our attention, vigilance, to build

society, not to ruin it. What are the things I pay more attention to, to which I dedicate more time or more resources?

“They were seized with great fear.” They weren't people easily intimidated; they were ready to fight wolves and thieves, but now they see something not easy to understand: who are these that appear? It is something unexpected and too big. We too can find ourselves unprepared, discouraged and frightened in the face of life's events. What am I concerned about in my life and in my response to the vocation?

“They said to each other: Let's go”. They share joy and enthusiasm and encourage each other. We often talk about many topics but we are afraid to share our spiritual experiences, to encourage each other. We fear that others will laugh at us. What is my level of communication with other members of my community, especially about religious and spiritual things?

“They went without delay.” I like that "without delay", without asking further questions, without asking too many "but, if, maybe". They don't put obstacles to the announcement but they feel totally involved. Do you remember the passage in the Gospel in which several people called by Jesus say: Yes, but first let me do this or that, or who even say no. What kind of yes did I say to the Lord? Did I set any condition?

They "reported": they have already become missionaries who do not impose their doctrine, but who share their experience of faith, in this case with Mary and Joseph. Naturally one would say: but what can they teach Mary and Joseph? We always have something to learn, even from the youngest, and something to teach, even to the older

ones. Simply sharing their experience is the most beautiful gift they have given to the holy family. Someone must have brought food, but after a few days the food ran out. Someone will have brought other material things, when fleeing to Egypt the Holy Family cannot take them along, but the testimony of faith and spirituality offered by the shepherds will always remain in the hearts of Joseph and Mary: "And Mary for her part kept these things meditating on them in her heart". What kind of contribution do I make to my community and during my apostolate? What do I want to receive from others? And how do I use what I receive? Am I convinced that I too have something important to announce on behalf of God?

“They returned glorifying God.” The experience does not end with the action (visiting) but leaves after-effects of praise, prayer and inner joy. Our apostolate must always be prepared by reflection and prayer, but also followed by reflection and prayer. When I do an apostolate, I benefit others. When I get home, I can be tired and even drained at times. If I take the time to review what I have done, and I am able to transform it into a prayer of praise, this enriches me, makes me grow in faith and experience. How much time do I spend reviewing what I do, and thanking God for what happened?

A final aspect that we must underline is the ability to see, despite the poverty of the sign. What they saw in the cave of Bethlehem had nothing royal about it. Yet they act as if they have seen the most important thing in the world. It is the reading of life through faith. The little they have seen is the door to so much faith, and to full joy. What do we look for as signs to be able to trust God? Can we rejoice even in small, less perfect, less flashy things?

For reflection:

- What are the things I pay more attention to, dedicate more time or resources to?
- What am I worried about in my life and in my response to my vocation?
- What is my level of communication with other members of my community, especially regarding religious, spiritual things?
- What kind of yes did I say to the Lord? Have I set any conditions?
- What do I want to receive from others? And how do I use what I receive? Am I convinced that I too have something important to announce on behalf of God?
- How much time do I spend reviewing what I do, and thanking God for what happened?
- What do we look for as signs to be able to trust God? Can we rejoice even in small, less perfect, less flashy things?

Conclusion

People we find in the Gospel share the same characteristics, doubts, desires, problems and projects of many of us. What has changed their life was the meeting of Jesus, the decision to let Him touch their life.

Jesus makes the difference in our life, gives solutions to our problems, makes a way where there seem to be no way.